

# UKRAINE CONFLICT UPDATES

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 21

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Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Layne Philipson, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 21, 7:45pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Two days of shelling caused widespread damage to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on November 20 and 21.** The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stated on November 21 that there are no immediate nuclear safety and security concerns and that the integrity of all six nuclear reactors and the spent and fresh fuel storage facilities remain uncompromised despite the intense shelling.<sup>[1]</sup> Russia and Ukraine both accused the other of conducting the artillery strikes on the ZNPP on November 20 and 21.<sup>[2]</sup> One Russian milblogger referenced a video of the shelling taken by Chechen forces and stated that it appeared the shelling came from positions in Russian-controlled territory south of the ZNPP, not Ukrainian-controlled territory north of the ZNPP.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian nuclear operator Rosatom Head Alexey Likhachev warned of a nuclear disaster at the ZNPP, and Russian milbloggers largely amplified his statements and called for the transfer of all Ukrainian nuclear power plants to Russian operation.<sup>[4]</sup> ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces have staged false flag attacks against the ZNPP and previously reported on Russian forces' unlawful militarization of the ZNPP.<sup>[5]</sup> Artillery strikes themselves are unlikely to penetrate the containment units protecting each nuclear reactor and instead pose a greater threat to the spent nuclear fuel storage facilities, which could leak radioactive material and cause a radiological (as opposed to nuclear) disaster if compromised. The continued conflation of radiological and nuclear accidents and the constant discussion of the threat of disaster at the ZNPP is likely part of a wider Russian information operation meant to undermine Western support for Ukraine and frame Russian control of the plant as essential to avoid nuclear catastrophe in order to consolidate further operational and administrative control of Ukrainian nuclear assets and compel elements of the international community to recognize Russian annexation of Ukrainian territory at least obliquely.

**The Russian government is continuing to increase its control of the Russian information space as a Russian milblogger noted that Russian efforts to shape the information space “look like a kitten against a rhinoceros” compared with foreign “think tanks,” non-profit organizations, and**

**“independent media.”**<sup>[6]</sup> Russian news outlet *Kommersant* reported on November 21 that the Russian State Duma may consider a bill before the end of 2022 on the regulation of online “recommender” algorithms that would ultimately allow the government to turn off specific algorithms.<sup>[7]</sup> The bill is reportedly being developed by Duma Deputy on Information Policy Anton Gorelkin and will include the regulation of social media networks, online cinemas, search engines, and internet marketplaces.<sup>[8]</sup> *Kommersant* noted that this bill will require the owners of all sites and platforms to ensure the government’s ability to fully or partially block the participation of specific users and that these provisions appeared before the beginning of the war in October 2021 to specifically target Western outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube due to the risk of “social conflict.”<sup>[9]</sup> Certain Russian milbloggers responded to the speculation regarding the bill and noted that such recommender algorithms make it harder for nations to disperse propaganda due to the prevalence of accessible and personally tailored information available on the internet.<sup>[10]</sup> The Duma is likely considering this bill in an attempt to address a consistent point of neuralgia in the Kremlin’s ability to present and defend the war to domestic

audiences and to establish a direct means of countering both internal and external sources of online dissent.

The Russian Federal State Security Service (FSB) additionally took steps to codify control over the information space and signed a decree on November 4 that approved a list of military and military-technical activities, which if received by foreign sources, can be used against the security of the Russian Federation.[11] The decree essentially codifies types of information relating to Russian military operations that the FSB regards as threats to Russian security that are not technically classified as official state secrets and includes a broad list of provisions relating to informational coverage of the war such as “information on the assessment and forecasts of the development of the military-political, strategic (operational) situation,” and “information about the observance of rule of law and the moral and psychological climate” of Russian troops.[12] This decree represents an extended effort on the part of the FSB to broadly ban a wide range of information on the Russian military, which would ostensibly place tighter controls on discourse among Russian milbloggers and other such sources who frequently discuss and criticize tactical, operational, and strategic dimensions of the war in Ukraine.

Both the proposed Duma bill and the FSB decree indicate that the Russian government is scrambling to take control of the information space as it is increasingly inundated by criticisms of the Russian military that are levied both internally and externally. Russian officials likely seek to consolidate censorship measures to crack down on the prevalence of foreign voices and domestic critiques by applying legislative pressure to fundamental algorithms and presenting a wide range of activities that can be considered detrimental to Russian state security.

**Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian special services are planning false flag attacks on Belarusian critical infrastructure in an attempt that would likely fail to pressure the Belarusian military to enter the war in Ukraine.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on November 20 that Russian special services are planning to conduct several false flag terrorist attacks on Belarusian critical infrastructure facilities, particularly on the “Ostrovets” Belarusian nuclear power plant.[13] GUR also reported that Russian special services will blame the attacks on Ukrainian and NATO member states to accelerate the Belarusian military’s involvement in Russia’s war in Ukraine.[14] ISW has previously assessed that Belarus’ entry into the war remains highly unlikely due to the heavy domestic risk that involvement would pose to the survival of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s regime and that Russian and Belarusian highlight their bilateral defense cooperation to perpetuate an ongoing information operation that the Belarusian military will enter the war.[15] Potential false flag attacks remain unlikely to change the domestic factors that ISW continues to assess constrain Lukashenko’s willingness to enter the war on Russia’s behalf.

**A Ukrainian official acknowledged on November 21 that Ukrainian forces are conducting a military operation on the Kinburn Spit, a location which would allow Ukrainian forces to better conduct potential operations on the left (east) bank in Kherson Oblast.** Ukrainian Southern Defense Forces spokesperson Natalia Humenyuk stated on November 21 that Ukrainian forces are conducting a military operation on the Kinburn Spit and called for operational silence to be respected.[16] Humenyuk emphasized that the Kinburn Spit is the last piece of territory that Russian forces occupy in Mykolaiv Oblast.[17] The Kinburn Spit is only 4km across the strait from Ochakiv and allows for control of the entrance to the Dnipro and Southern Bug rivers as well as the Mykolaiv and Kherson city ports. Russian forces used positions on the Kinburn Spit to conduct routine missile and artillery strikes on Ukrainian positions in Ochakiv, southern Mykolaiv Oblast, and other areas along the Ukrainian-controlled Black Sea Coast.[18] The Kinburn Spit is also out of the 25km range of 152mm artillery that Russian forces have accumulated on the left (east) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast. Control of the Kinburn Spit would allow Ukrainian forces to relieve Russian strikes on the Ukrainian-controlled Black Sea coast, increase naval activity in the area, and conduct potential operations to cross to the left (east) bank in Kherson Oblast under significantly less Russian artillery fire compared to a crossing of the Dnipro River.

**The November 18 video of a Russian soldier opening fire on a group of Ukrainian servicemen while Russian troops were surrendering has served as a catalyst for further division between the Kremlin and prominent voices in the Russian information space.** As ISW reported on November 18, a video widely circulated on social media shows a Russian soldier fire on Ukrainian troops as Ukrainian soldiers were taking prisoners in Makiivka, Luhansk Oblast, resulting in the deaths of the Russian

prisoners. Open-source analysts and later a *New York Times* independent investigation confirmed that the Russian serviceman was the first to open fire but did not offer conclusions about how the Russian prisoners died.[19] While Russian officials responded to the video by adamantly accusing Ukraine of war crimes and calling for an investigation into the identities of the Ukrainian soldiers, several Russian milbloggers capitalized on the content of the video to criticize the Russian military and mobilization practices. One milblogger noted that the Makiivka shooting video is a clear example of how mobilized recruits lack the basic morale and discipline to properly fight for their beliefs and claimed that it is ridiculous that so many Russian soldiers even surrendered to Ukrainian troops in the first place.[20] The divide between milbloggers criticizing the Makiivka shooting is emblematic of Russian military failures, and the Kremlin's using it to further an information operation against the Ukrainian military may further fragment the information space.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Two days of shelling caused widespread damage to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- The Russian government is continuing to escalate control over the Russian information space.
- Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian special services are planning false flag attacks on Belarusian critical infrastructure in an attempt that would likely fail to pressure the Belarusian military to enter the war in Ukraine. ISW continues to assess that it is unlikely Belarusian forces will enter the war.
- A Ukrainian official acknowledged that Ukrainian forces are conducting a military operation on the Kinburn Spit, Mykolaiv Oblast.
- The November 18 video of a Russian soldier opening fire on a group of Ukrainian servicemen while Russian troops were surrendering has served as a catalyst for further division between the Kremlin and prominent voices in the Russian information space.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in eastern Ukraine amid worsening weather conditions.
- Russian forces continued ground assaults near Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Russian forces continued conducting defensive measures and establishing fortifications in Kherson Oblast south of the Dnipro River as Ukrainian forces continued striking Russian force accumulations in southern Ukraine.
- Russian mobilized personnel continue to protest and desert as their relatives continue to publicly advocate against mobilization issues.
- Russian occupation authorities intensified filtration measures and the incorporation of occupied territory into Russia.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 20**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, November 20. This report discusses the rising influence of the milblogger (military correspondent or *voenkor*) community in Russia despite its increasingly critical commentary on the conduct of the war. The milblogger community reportedly consists of over 500 independent authors and has emerged as an authoritative voice on the Russian war. The community maintains a heavily pro-war and Russian nationalist outlook and is intertwined with prominent Russian nationalist ideologists. Milbloggers' close relationships with armed forces – whether Russian Armed Forces, Chechen special units, Wagner Group mercenaries, or proxy formations – have given this community an authoritative voice arguably louder in the Russian information space than the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Russian President Vladimir Putin has defended the milbloggers from MoD attacks and protected their independence even as he increases oppression and censorship throughout Russia.

**Key inflections in ongoing military operations on November 20:**

- The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on November 20 that Russian special services are planning false flag attacks on Belarusian critical infrastructure facilities to pressure the Belarusian military to enter the war in Ukraine.

- The Ukrainian General Staff added that Ukrainian officials have not observed the formation of any Belarusian assault groups. ISW continues to assess that it is unlikely that Belarusian forces will invade Ukraine.
  - Russian and Ukrainian sources reported ongoing fighting along the Svatove–Kremenna line on November 20. Russian sources noted that deteriorating weather conditions are impacting hostilities.
  - A Ukrainian military official stated that Ukrainian forces have liberated 12 settlements in Luhansk Oblast since the start of the eastern counteroffensive.
  - The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed to strike a Ukrainian troop concentration in the area of Novoselivske, Luhansk Oblast. The Russian MoD previously claimed to repel Ukrainian attacks on the settlement, and this claim might indicate that Ukrainian forces advanced to the settlement.
  - Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and western Donetsk directions.
  - Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continued to transfer some forces from the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River to other operational directions, but still maintain a significant force presence in southern Kherson Oblast.
  - Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that shelling damaged the infrastructure of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). One Russian milblogger claimed that the shelling came from Russian-controlled territory south of the plant, but most Russian sources accused Ukraine.
  - Russian occupation officials may have purged the occupation Mayor of Enerhodar Alexander Volga. Some Russian sources claimed that Volga received a promotion within the occupation administration.
  - Russian military officials continued mobilization measures amid reports of ongoing resistance and poor conditions.
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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 19, 6:30pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces are reportedly beginning to reinforce their positions in occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts with personnel from Kherson Oblast and mobilized servicemen. The Ukrainian General Staff reported an increase in Russian military personnel in Luhansk City and noted that Russian forces are housing servicemen in abandoned homes in Krasne and Simeikyne about 30km southeast of Luhansk City.<sup>[1]</sup> Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Russian forces are transferring the remnants of the Russian airborne units from right (west)

bank Kherson Oblast to Luhansk Oblast.[2] Luhansk Oblast Military Administration added that a part of redeploying Russian troops is arriving in Novoaidar, approximately 55km east of Severodonetsk.[3] Advisor to Mariupol Mayor Petro Andryushenko also noted the arrival of redeployed personnel and military equipment to Mariupol, stating that Russian forces are placing 10,000 to 15,000 servicemen in the Mariupol Raion.[4] Andryushenko stated that newly mobilized men are deploying to the presumably western Donetsk Oblast frontline via Mariupol. Russian forces are reportedly attempting to disperse forces by deploying some elements in the Hulyaipole direction in eastern Zaporizhia Oblast.[5] Russia will also likely commit additional mobilized forces in the coming weeks, given that mobilized units of the Russian 2nd Motorized Rifle Division of the 1st Tank Army have finished their training in Brest Oblast, Belarus.[6] Russian forces will likely continue to use mobilized and redeployed servicemen to reignite offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast and maintain defensive positions in Luhansk Oblast.

**US intelligence officials stated on November 19 that Russian and Iranian officials finalized a deal in early November to manufacture Iranian drones on Russian territory.[7]** The US officials stated that the deal could allow Russia to “dramatically increase its stockpile” of Iranian drones. The Washington Post reported that Russian forces have launched 400 Iranian kamikaze drones since first using them in the Ukrainian theater in August, and Ukrainian officials have previously stated that Ukrainian forces down 70% of drones before they can strike their targets.[8] The US officials stated that it is unclear what assistance Russia will provide to Iran in return for the drones.[9] The deepening relationship between Russia and Iran, specifically in the provision of long-range munitions such as kamikaze drones and precision missiles, may allow Russian forces to sustain their campaign against Ukrainian energy infrastructure for a longer period than their diminishing stockpile of munitions would otherwise allow. This report also suggests that Russia can somehow circumvent Western sanctions to acquire the microchips needed to program the drones it plans on manufacturing. A Russian milblogger claimed that the deal allows Russian officials to claim they build Russian drones—thus providing an informational win—having previously stated that the domestic manufacturing of Iranian drones on Russian territory humiliates Russia.[10]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces are reportedly beginning to reinforce their positions in occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts with personnel from Kherson Oblast and mobilized servicemen.
- US intelligence officials stated that Russian and Iranian officials finalized a deal in early November to manufacture Iranian drones on Russian territory.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces maintained their offensive operations around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and west of Donetsk City despite reports of high losses around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued efforts to fortify areas around ground lines of communication in southern Ukraine while struggling with the partial loss of the use of the Kerch Strait Bridge.
- Russian media sources continued active discussions of an impending second wave of mobilization.
- The number of Russian prisoners appears to have dropped by about 6.5% since January of 2022 likely due to intensive Wagner Group recruitment.
- Russian authorities are working to establish control over the information space in occupied territories and identify Ukrainian partisans.

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## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 18**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan  
November 18, 8:30pm ET

**[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.**

**Russian officials are preparing for further covert mobilization efforts even as the fall conscription cycle is underway, likely further flooding the already overburdened Russian force generation apparatus in such a way that will be detrimental to the development of mobilized and conscripted servicemen.** Russian Telegram channels actively discussed indicators on November 18 that the Kremlin is preparing for a second mobilization wave and circulated an image of a draft summons received by a citizen of St. Petersburg who was reportedly told to appear for mobilization in January 2023 despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement of the formal end of partial mobilization on October 31.[1] Nationalist milbloggers additionally circulated claims that general mobilization will begin in December or January.[2] An independent Russian outlet published an investigation on November 18 showing that state structures and enterprises are continuing to prepare their employees for mobilization by sending them to various training programs and mobilization-related educational courses.[3] Another Russian outlet noted that the Odintsovo garrison military court in Moscow Oblast inadvertently confirmed that mobilization is continuing despite its formal end.[4] The court reportedly accused a mobilized soldier of beating his commander on November 13 "during the performance of his duties of military service or in connection with the performance of these duties during the period of mobilization," which indicates that the court is operating on the legal basis that mobilization is still very much underway.[5] The Kremlin has said that Russian President Vladimir Putin has no need to sign a decree formally ending the mobilization period, as ISW has previously reported.[6]

The continuation of covert mobilization efforts and potential preparations for another mobilization wave in tandem with the current fall conscription cycle are likely adding substantial strain to an already overburdened Russian force generation apparatus. As ISW previously assessed, Putin likely ordered the end of partial mobilization in order to free up bureaucratic and administrative capacity for the November 1 conscription class.[7] However, it is evident that Russian authorities never fully halted mobilization efforts, which means that a limited number of mobilized recruits are still being forced through the training system at the same time as conscripts are going through their own training cycle. This will likely lead to even lower quality training for both mobilized recruits and conscripts as they compete for insufficient training capacity. Another wave of mobilization in the coming months will only worsen the situation and likely degrade the overall quality of the Russian troops that will be funneled to the frontline in Ukraine.

**The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that it does not recognize the illegal Russian seizure and operation of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) or the illegal annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory, a sharp escalation in IAEA rhetoric.** The IAEA's Board of Governors issued a statement on November 17 that called on Russia to "immediately abandon its baseless claims of ownership of the plant" and to withdraw "military and other personnel" from the ZNPP due to "grave concerns" over the ZNPP's integrity.[8] The IAEA issued a statement on November 18 that Russian strikes on November 17 partially or completely cut power to Ukraine's Khmelnytsky Nuclear Power Plant and Rivne Nuclear Power Plant, and IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi stated that these strikes demonstrate "the potential nuclear safety and security risks facing all of Ukraine's nuclear facilities during this terrible war, not just the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant."[9] ISW recently assessed that the IAEA's rhetorical shift suggests that Russian physical control and operational authority over the ZNPP alarms the IAEA.[10] Russian forces' ongoing threats to both the ZNPP and Ukrainian nuclear power plants (NPPs) in unoccupied territory indicate that Russia is an unsuitable caretaker of the ZNPP, even though the Russian government relies on claims that it is a responsible operator of the ZNPP to legitimize its ongoing presence at the plant.[11]

**Social media footage circulated on November 18 shows a Russian soldier opening fire on Ukrainians as other Russian soldiers were surrendering.** The graphic footage shows Ukrainian troops in Makiivka, Luhansk Oblast, taking a group of Russian soldiers prisoner when one Russian soldier emerges from a house holding a gun and opens fire.[12] Drone footage shows the bodies of the deceased Russian soldiers after the incident.[13] Open-source analysts concluded that the Russian soldier opened fire initially, but it is unclear who killed the Russian prisoners, when, and under what circumstances.[14] However, the Russian information space immediately responded to the footage by widely accusing Ukrainian forces of a "mass execution" of the Russian prisoners.[15] The Russian Investigative Committee opened a criminal case against Ukrainian Armed Forces and is reportedly trying to identify the Ukrainian servicemen in the video.[16]

## **Key Takeaways**

- Russian officials are preparing for further covert mobilization efforts even as the fall conscription cycle is underway, likely further diminishing the development of quality mobilized and conscripted servicemen.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that it does not recognize the illegal Russian seizure of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) or the illegal annexation of other occupied Ukrainian territory, a sharp escalation in IAEA rhetoric.
- Social media footage circulated on November 18 shows a Russian soldier opening fire on Ukrainians as other Russian soldiers were surrendering.
- Russian forces reinforced rear areas in Luhansk Oblast and attempted to regain lost positions as Ukrainian troops continued counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued limited ground assaults near Bakhmut and Avdiivka and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian occupation officials and military leadership are seemingly increasingly concerned about subsequent Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine.
- Russia continues to face exceedingly low morale and poor discipline among its forces against the backdrop of ongoing domestic backlash to partial mobilization.
- Russian occupation officials and forces continued to intensify filtration measures in Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine and to undermine the Ukrainian national identity.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 17, 7:45pm ET

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Russian forces conducted another massive wave of missile strikes across Ukraine on November 17. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops launched five airstrikes and 25 cruise missile strikes at civilian infrastructure objects in Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv oblasts throughout the day.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian Air Force Command noted that Ukrainian air defense forces destroyed four cruise missiles, five Shahed-136 drones, and two Kh-59 guided missiles.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian forces conducted the largest missile attack since the start of the war on November 15, and as ISW has previously assessed, such missile campaigns are consuming Russia's already depleted store of precision munitions.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Russian forces in eastern Kherson Oblast are likely partially vulnerable to a Ukrainian interdiction campaign such as the one Ukrainian forces successfully exploited to retake western Kherson Oblast.** Several major ground lines of communication (GLOCs) run through eastern Kherson Oblast into other Russian-controlled areas in southern Ukraine: the southern T2202 Nova Kahovka-Armiansk route, the southeastern P47 Kakovkha-Henichesk route, and the M14 highway that runs eastward into Melitopol, Berdyansk, and Mariupol. Geolocated satellite imagery indicates that Russian troops are establishing defensive positions along some of these critical GLOCs, and social media reporting indicates that Ukrainian strikes have already begun targeting Russian concentration areas and military assets on these routes.<sup>[4]</sup> The limited number of high-quality roads and railways in this area, particularly connecting Crimea to the mainland, creates potential bottlenecks that could be vulnerable to Ukrainian interdiction efforts that would gradually degrade the Russian ability to continue supplying its grouping in eastern Kherson Oblast and other areas of southern Ukraine. ISW previously reported the targeting of similar bottlenecks along key GLOCs--not just the bridges across the Dnipro River--during Ukraine's Kherson counteroffensive in late August to mid-October culminated in the Russian withdrawal from the west bank of Kherson Oblast to positions further south of the Dnipro River. Ukrainian forces will likely find it harder to achieve such dramatic effects in eastern Kherson but may be able to disrupt Russian efforts to solidify and hold their new defensive lines.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree changing the composition of the Russian Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (HRC) on November 17.**[5] The decree notably expels four Russian human rights activists, including Ekaterina Vinokurova, who wrote a piece criticizing the rise of “patriotic” Telegram channels and nationalist milbloggers who have cornered the information space against opposition outlets who deviate from the predominant Kremlin line of the war in Ukraine.[6] Russian media previously reported that Vinokurova and other members of the HRC appealed to the Russian Investigative Committee to look into the widely circulated video of the execution of a former Wagner Group fighter who reportedly defected to Ukraine.[7] Putin’s new appointees to the HRC include a slate of Russian political and proxy members and notably Sasha Kots, a prominent milblogger and war correspondent who has been heavily involved in covering Russian operations in Ukraine.[8] Kots most recently called for Russia to maintain massive missile strikes against critical Ukrainian infrastructure on November 17.[9] This decree likely represents the Kremlin’s wider effort to stifle domestic civil opposition by continuing to platform prominent voices in the information space that propagate the Kremlin’s line on the war in Ukraine.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces conducted another massive wave of missile strikes across Ukraine on November 17
- Russian forces in eastern Kherson Oblast are likely partially vulnerable to a Ukrainian interdiction campaign such as the one Ukrainian forces successfully exploited to retake western Kherson Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree changing the composition of the Russian Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights (HRC) on November 17.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian troops are conducting counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian troops continued targeting Russian military assets and concentration areas on the east bank of Kherson Oblast and in the rear areas of Zaporizhia Oblast on November 17.
- Russian authorities continue to face discontented mobilized personnel and low morale on the front lines.
- Russian occupation officials continued to destroy Ukrainian culture in Russian-occupied territories.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 16**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 16, 6:45pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian sources and proxy officials are flagrantly touting the forced adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families. Prominent Russian milbloggers began circulating a multi-part documentary series on November 9 featuring several Ukrainian children from Donbas after being adopted into Russian families.[1] The documentary series claims that Russian officials have evacuated over 150,000 children from Donbas in 2022 alone.[2] It is unclear exactly how Russian sources are calculating this figure, and Ukrainian officials previously estimated this number to be 6,000 to 8,000.[3] Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov additionally stated he is working with Russian Federation Commissioner for Children’s Rights Maria Lvova-Belova to bring “difficult teenagers” from various Russian regions and occupied Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts to Chechnya to engage in “preventative work” and “military-patriotic education.”[4] Lvova-Belova has continually advocated for deportations and adoptions of Ukrainian children and herself adopted a child from Mariupol.[5] Forced adoption programs

and the deportation of children under the guise of vacation and rehabilitation schemes likely form the backbone of a massive Russian depopulation campaign that may amount to a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and constitute a wider ethnic cleansing effort, as ISW has previously reported.[6]

**Ukrainian sources continued to clarify the damage caused by the massive November 15 Russian missile strike across Ukraine.** The Ukrainian General Staff stated on November 16 that Russian forces launched over 90 Kh-101 and Kalibr cruise missiles and 11 drones over the course of November 15 and targeted critical infrastructure in a number of oblasts.[7] Ukrainian Air Force Command reported that Ukrainian air defense and ground forces shot down 75 missiles and 10 Shahed-136 drones.[8] US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin noted on November 16 that the US-provided National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS) had a 100% success rate in intercepting Russian missiles.[9] As ISW previously reported, Russian forces likely used a substantial portion of their high-precision weapon systems in the November 15 attack.[10]

**The Russian information space largely followed the official Kremlin framing of the missile strike on Polish territory as a Western provocation.** The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated on November 16 that Ukrainian and other foreign officials' statements about Russian missiles in connection with the strike on Polish territory constitute a "deliberate provocation with the aim of escalating the situation."<sup>[11]</sup> Russian Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev accused the West of moving closer to world war by waging a hybrid attack against Russia following the strike on Polish territory.<sup>[12]</sup> Russian milbloggers widely accused Western and Ukrainian officials of trying to falsely blame Russia for the strike in order to justify increased support to Ukraine and further escalation in Eastern Europe.<sup>[13]</sup> Some Russian sources also asserted that Ukrainian and Western officials were trying to use the incident to either pressure Russia to end its coordinated missile campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure or to justify sending "better" air defenses to Ukraine.<sup>[14]</sup> The Russian milbloggers' support of the Kremlin framing of the strike as a Western provocation is to be expected of a Russian information space that widely views the conflict in Ukraine as a Western operation aimed at degrading Russia as a regional and global power.

**Wagner financer Yevgeny Prigozhin is continuing to establish himself as a central figure in the pro-war ultranationalist community, likely in pursuit of ambitious political goals.** Russian opposition media outlet *Meduza* reported on November 16 that two sources close to the Kremlin stated that Prigozhin is thinking about creating a "conservative movement" that may become a political party.<sup>[15]</sup> *Meduza*'s sources reported that Prigozhin has established an information campaign of constant anti-elite rhetoric modeled after jailed opposition figure Alexei Navalny's social media campaign against Russian corruption, but to a very different effect.<sup>[16]</sup> *Meduza*'s sources reported that Prigozhin intends to simultaneously use the anti-elite social media campaign to cast himself as a populist figure while currying favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin by intimidating elites that may be viewed as insufficiently loyal to Putin.<sup>[17]</sup> ISW has previously reported that Prigozhin is attempting to appeal to a constituency in Russia that is both interested in Russia's claimed national superiority and Soviet brutalist strength and opposed to Russian elite corruption.<sup>[18]</sup> Prigozhin has previously denied that he is attempting to cast himself as a politician or that he intends to create a political party or movement.<sup>[19]</sup> ISW has previously reported that Prigozhin is also pursuing the creation of parallel military structures to advance his influence in the ultranationalist pro-war community.<sup>[20]</sup> Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Andriy Chernyak reported on November 15 that Prigozhin initially began constructing parallel military structures to suppress potential uprisings in Russia but capitalized upon the Kremlin's need for more capable forces in Russia's offensive campaign in Ukraine.<sup>[21]</sup> ISW has previously assessed that Prigozhin's personal army serves his own personal political goals first and the Russian war effort in Ukraine second.<sup>[22]</sup> Prigozhin will likely continue efforts to establish parallel military structures and form an anti-elite campaign to cement himself as the central figure of an ultranationalist pro-war political movement in Russia.

### Key Takeaways

- **Russian sources and proxy officials are flagrantly touting the forced adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families.**

- Ukrainian sources continued to clarify the damage caused by the massive November 15 Russian missile strike across Ukraine.
- The Russian information space largely followed the official Kremlin framing of the missile strike on Polish territory as a Western provocation.
- Wagner Group financer Yevgeny Prigozhin is continuing to establish himself as a central figure in the pro-war ultranationalist community likely in pursuit of ambitious political goals.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the directions of Svatove and Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut and Avdiivka, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued targeting Russian forces and logistics nodes in southern Ukraine.
- Multiple reports indicate that the morale and psychological state of Russian forces in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts are exceedingly low.
- Russian officials continued their efforts to replace proxy officials in occupied territories with Russian officials, forcibly relocate residents, and integrate occupied areas with Russia.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 15**

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 15, 10:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces conducted the largest set of missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure since the start of the war. Ukrainian Air Force Command spokesperson Yuriy Ignat reported on November 15 that Russian forces launched about 100 Kh-101 and Kh-555 cruise missiles at targets in Ukraine, primarily against Ukrainian critical infrastructure facilities.<sup>[1]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces targeted Ukrainian infrastructure with ten drones.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Russian forces struck targets in Kyiv as well as in Rivne, Zhytomyr, Lviv, Khmelnytskyi, Dnipropetrovsk, Poltava, Vinnytsia, Odesa, Kirovohrad, Cherkasy, Volyn, and Kharkiv oblasts.<sup>[3]</sup>

**The Russian military likely used a substantial portion of its remaining high-precision weapon systems in the coordinated missile strikes on November 15.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 73 Russian cruise missiles and all drones on November 15.<sup>[4]</sup> Ukrainian air defenses had previously shot down 43 cruise missiles out of 84 and 13 drones out of 24 during the October 10 coordinated Russian missile strikes.<sup>[5]</sup> Ukraine's increased shoot-down percentage illustrates the improvement in Ukrainian air defenses in the last month, and the Ukrainian General Staff attributed this improvement to the effectiveness of Western-provided air defense systems. ISW also assesses that Russian forces are greatly depleting their stock of high-precision weapons systems and will likely have to slow the pace of their campaign against critical Ukrainian infrastructure.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian missile strikes continue to pose a threat to the Ukrainian civilian population with Ukrainian Deputy Head of the Presidential Office Kyrylo Tymoshenko stating that the energy situation is rather "critical" in Ukraine.<sup>[7]</sup> **Damage to Ukraine's energy infrastructure is unlikely to break Ukrainians' spirit, however, given Ukraine's improving air defenses and recent ground victories in Kherson Oblast.**

**Polish officials announced that a likely "Russian-made missile" landed in Poland within six kilometers of the international border with Ukraine. Western officials have yet to make definitive statements regarding the incident.** The Polish Foreign Ministry stated on November 15 that a "Russian-made missile" killed two Polish citizens in the border village of Przewodow.<sup>[8]</sup> Polish President Andrzej Duda noted that Poland does not currently have information regarding the actor responsible for firing the missile but noted that the missile was "most probably Russian-made."<sup>[9]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) denied Russia's involvement in striking any targets near the Ukraine-Polish border and claimed that the incident is a "provocation."<sup>[10]</sup> Russian forces, however, did target energy infrastructure in Lviv City, about 72km south of Przewodow.<sup>[11]</sup> US President Joe Biden stated that according to preliminary

information it is unlikely that the missile was fired from territorial Russia but emphasized that the investigation is still ongoing as of the time of this publication.[12] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Russia of staging a “serious provocation” on NATO territory.[13] ISW will continue to monitor the situation.

**The Kremlin had prepared today’s massive missile campaign before Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky presented his 10-point peace proposal at the G20 summit on November 15.**

15. Zelensky reiterated that Ukraine will negotiate with Russia if the Kremlin totally withdraws its forces from Ukraine, restores Ukraine’s territorial integrity, and ensures punishment for war crimes among other provisions on nuclear, energy, and food security.[14] The Kremlin likely deliberately planned a massive missile strike campaign on Ukraine in anticipation of Zelensky’s speech at the G20 summit given that a multi-direction missile campaign requires significant military preparation. The Russian pro-war community on Telegram claimed that the Kremlin retaliated for Zelensky’s “Russophobic” statements shortly after his speech, but the impossibility of launching such a massive attack on short notice highlights the Kremlin’s disinterest in setting the stage for negotiations with Ukraine.[15]

**The Kremlin’s official narrative surrounding the G20 summit further confirms Russia’s disinterest in the prospect of peace negotiations with Ukraine.** Russian President Vladimir Putin did not appear at the summit and instead signed numerous decrees granting honorary titles to Russian-occupied Ukrainian cities.[16] Putin’s Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov and Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia will continue its “special military operation” in Ukraine, accusing Zelensky of unwillingness to negotiate with Russia.[17] Lavrov called Ukraine’s conditions “unrealistic and inadequate,” which has been the Kremlin’s recurrent position throughout the war.[18] Peskov also made a point to emphasize that Russia will still treat liberated Kherson City as the capital of Russian-occupied Kherson Oblast, and Secretary of Russia’s Security Council Nikolai Patrushev repeated the original false narratives used to justify the invasion that Russia needs to defend Donbas and that Ukrainian “Nazis” failed to comply with the Minsk agreements.[19]

**Russian military commanders reportedly ignored existing plans for offensive operations in the Vuhledar direction and committed poorly trained reinforcements to costly assaults on Pavlivka out of impatience.** Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) military commander Aleksandr Khodakovsky claimed on November 15 that Russian forces initially planned to attack in the Vuhledar area from two directions but that he and other commanders realized that the poor training of reinforcements and their inability to contact brigade commanders made such plans impossible.[20] Khodakovsky claimed that brigade commanders changed the plan completely and committed all Russian forces in the area to an attack on Pavlivka, Donetsk Oblast.[21] ISW had previously reported that Russian forces prematurely impaled an insufficient concentration of mobilized personnel on offensive pushes aimed at seizing Pavlivka leading to extensive losses, particularly among the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet.[22] Russian military officials likely abandoned their initial plans and committed poorly trained reinforcements to the assault on Pavlivka due to a sense of politically-driven urgency to restart the Donetsk offensive campaign before the planned Russian withdrawal from Kherson City.

**The high costs associated with the Russian offensive push on Pavlivka continue to generate criticism of Russian military leadership.** Khodakovsky claimed that Russian military leadership is trying to blame the “miserable results” on the commander of the 40th Separate Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet for not properly supporting the Russian 155th Naval Infantry Brigade.[23] Khodakovsky argued that the brigade commanders are guilty of the high costs of the assault and that the commander of the Russian forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovikin, should not allow an “innocent” commander to take the blame for the poor planning of Russian military leadership.[24] ISW previously assessed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) issued a rare statement on November 7 in response to the extensive Russian milblogger outcry concerning the losses associated with the Pavlivka offensive operation.[25] Khodakovsky’s criticisms of the Russian military command indicate that the Russian MoD likely failed to address the outrage fully and that Russian pro-war figures and milbloggers will continue to criticize Russian military commanders.

**Russians are increasingly turning to various platforms on social media to express their dissatisfaction with mobilization problems, a phenomenon that has the ingredients to ignite organized online-based movements in Russia.** Sixteen anti-war groups in Russia launched a petition demanding that Russian President Vladimir Putin demobilize all mobilized Russian men.[26] The petition has already garnered almost 38,000 signatories as of the time of this publication. About 1,500 mothers of disabled children and mothers with more than three children in their households also petitioned Putin to

exempt their husbands from mobilization.[27] Russian opposition and non-governmental organizations such as Soldiers' Mothers of St. Petersburg had voiced concerns with the Russian Armed Forces prior to the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine but did not receive significant attention within the Russian information space.[28] Grievances over mobilization issues, however, reached the milblogger community that was already critical of the Russian Ministry of Defense and that has been discussing issues with the execution of mobilization since the second day of the order.[29] These grievances are increasingly influencing both the opposition and the pro-war communities, which is a new phenomenon. While Russian police have consistently suppressed small-scale protests throughout the country the Kremlin has yet to regulate platforms such as Telegram that allow Russians across the country to share their discontent and demand action from local officials with the backing of prominent milbloggers.

**Russian officials continued to set conditions to force the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to recognize Russian control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and thereby de facto recognize the Russian annexation of occupied Ukraine.** The IAEA announced on November 14 that Russian ZNPP authorities rejected a Ukrainian proposal to bring two reactors to a low power state from a hot shutdown state and that Russian officials are increasingly making "significant operational decisions," noting that IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi expressed concern at "open contradictions" in decision making at the ZNPP.[30] The IAEA and Ukraine's Resistance Center reported that Russia is increasingly importing technical staff from Russian nuclear power plants to the ZNPP.[31] The IAEA's reporting and concerns about the decision-making hierarchy at the ZNPP is an inflection in the IAEA's usual communications and suggests that Russian physical control and operational authority over the plant is increasing to a point that is alarming the IAEA.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces conducted the largest set of missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure since the start of the war, likely using a substantial portion of their remaining high-precision weapon systems.**
- Polish officials announced that a likely "Russian-made missile" landed in Poland within six kilometers of the international border with Ukraine.
- Russian military commanders reportedly ignored existing plans for offensive operations in the Vuhledar direction and committed poorly trained reinforcements to costly assaults on Pavlivka out of impatience, generating continued criticism of Russian military leadership.
- Russian officials continued to set conditions to force the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to recognize Russian control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and thereby de facto recognize the Russian annexation of occupied Ukraine.
- Russians are increasingly turning to various platforms on social media to express their dissatisfaction with mobilization problems, which could ignite organized online anti-war movements in Russia.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensives in the direction of Svatove and Kremenna, and Ukrainian forces continued targeting Russian logistics to the rear of Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar.
- Premature reports of Ukrainian forces capturing territory on the left bank of the Dnipro River provoked backlash in the Russian information space.
- Russian logistics routes from Crimea into southern Ukraine are likely highly degraded.
- Russian forces are continuing to supply their diminishing supplies with Belarusian military equipment.
- Russian officials continued to minimize the role of proxy officials in occupied territories in favor of Russian officials.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 15, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 14

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 14, 8:30pm ET

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**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) escalated claims of Russian territorial gains in Donetsk Oblast on November 13 and 14, likely to emphasize that Russian forces are intensifying operations in Donetsk Oblast following withdrawal from the right bank of Kherson Oblast.** The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces completed the capture of Mayorsk (20km south of Bakhmut) on November 13 and of Pavlivka (45km southwest of Donetsk City) on November 14 after several weeks of not making claims of Russian territorial gains.<sup>[1]</sup> As ISW assessed on November 13, Russian forces will likely recommit troops to Donetsk Oblast after leaving the right bank of Kherson Oblast, which will likely lead to an intensification of operations around Bakhmut, Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian forces will likely make gains in these areas in the coming days and weeks, but these gains are unlikely to be operationally significant. The Russian MoD is likely making more concrete territorial claims in order to set information conditions to frame Russian successes in Donetsk Oblast and detract from discontent regarding losses in Kherson Oblast.

**Russian milbloggers seized on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's November 14 visit to Kherson City to criticize Russian military capacity more substantively than in previous days during the Russian withdrawal from the right bank of Kherson Oblast.** Russian milbloggers largely complained that Zelensky arrived in Kherson City and was able to move around with relatively little concern about Russian strikes in his vicinity and questioned why Russian forces did not launch strikes on Zelensky.<sup>[3]</sup> One prominent milblogger noted that this shows that Russia does not want to win the war and criticized Russian forces for allowing Zelensky to step foot on "Russian territory."<sup>[4]</sup> Russian milbloggers have notably maintained a relatively muted response to the Russian loss of the right bank in the past days, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[5]</sup> The clear shift in rhetoric from relatively exculpatory language generally backing the withdrawal as a militarily sound decision to ire directed at Russian military failures suggests that Russian military leadership will likely be pressured to secure more direct gains in Donetsk Oblast and other areas.

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin continues to establish himself as a highly independent, Stalinist warlord in Russia, becoming a prominent figure within the nationalist pro-war community.** Prigozhin commented on a Russian execution video of a reportedly exchanged Wagner prisoner of war, Yevgeniy Nuzhin, sarcastically supporting Nuzhin's execution and denouncing him as a traitor to the Russian people.<sup>[6]</sup> Most sources noted that Wagner executed Nuzhin following a prisoner exchange on November 10, but a few claimed that Wagner kidnapped the serviceman via Prigozhin's connections to the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Russian General Staff.<sup>[7]</sup> Prigozhin claimed that Nuzhin planned his escape to free Ukraine and used the opportunity to compare Nuzhin to Russian elites who disregard the interests of the Russian people and fly away from Russia's problems in their personal business jets.<sup>[8]</sup> The Russian nationalist community overwhelmingly welcomed the public punishment of the supposed deserter, noting that the Wagner command is undertaking appropriate military measures to discipline its forces.<sup>[9]</sup> Some milbloggers even compared the execution to Joseph Stalin's "heroic" execution of Russian Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky who had also fled Bolshevik Russia, further confirming Prigozhin's appeal among the proponents of Stalin's repressive legacy.<sup>[10]</sup> **Prigozhin is taking actions that will resonate with a constituency interested in the ideology of Russia's national superiority, Soviet brutalist strength, and distasteful of the Kremlin's corruption, which Russian President Vladimir Putin has used as a political force throughout his reign.**

**Prigozhin is steadily using his participation in the Russian invasion of Ukraine to consolidate his influence in Russia.** One milblogger voiced a concern that the integration of Wagner mercenaries into Russian society is "the destruction of even the illusion of legality and respect for rights in Putin's Russian Federation."<sup>[11]</sup> The milblogger added that Prigozhin is seizing the initiative to expand Wagner's power in St. Petersburg while Russian security forces are "asleep." Such opinions are not widespread among Russian nationalists but highlight some concerns with Prigozhin's rapid expansion amid the Russian "special military operation" and its implications on the Putin regime. Prigozhin, for example, has requested that the FSB General Prosecutor's office investigate St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov for high treason after St. Petersburg officials denied a construction permit for his Wagner Center in the city.<sup>[12]</sup> He had also publicly scoffed at the Russian bureaucracy when asked if his forces will train at Russian training grounds, likely to further assert the independence of his forces.<sup>[13]</sup> Prigozhin's unhinged antics in the political sphere are unprecedented in Putin's regime.

## **Key Takeaways**

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) escalated claims of Russian territorial gains in Donetsk Oblast on November 13 and 14, likely to emphasize that Russian forces are intensifying operations in Donetsk Oblast following their withdrawal from the right bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Russian milbloggers seized on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's November 14 visit to Kherson City to criticize Russian military capacity more substantively than in previous days during the Russian withdrawal from the right bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin continues to establish himself as a highly independent, Stalinist warlord in Russia, becoming an even more prominent figure within the nationalist pro-war community.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on the Svatove-Kremenna line and clashed with Russian troops near Bilohorivka.
- Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to regain positions in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian forces intensified offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast and claimed to have gained territory around Bakhmut and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian troops launched an unsuccessful raid onto the Kinburn Spit.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed additional decrees refining mobilization protocols and expanding military recruitment provisions, likely in an ongoing effort to reinforce Russian war efforts.
- Russian occupation officials continued to drive the “evacuation” and forced relocation of residents in occupied territories and took efforts to move occupation elements farther from the Dnipro River.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 14, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan

November 13, 3:30 ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, November 13. This report discusses the likely evolution of the war following Ukraine's operational success in regaining control of western Kherson Oblast. The Russians are not setting conditions for a relaxation of hostilities for the rest of the fall and into the winter but rather are launching a new offensive in Donetsk Oblast. The Ukrainians will likely use combat power recouped from the liberation of western Kherson to reinforce their ongoing counter-offensive in Luhansk Oblast or to open a new counter-offensive drive elsewhere. This is not the time to slow down aid or press for ceasefires or negotiations, but rather the time to help Ukraine take advantage of its momentum in conditions that favor Kyiv rather than Moscow.**

**Ukraine has won an important victory in the campaign that liberated western Kherson Oblast, culminating in the withdrawal of Russian forces completed on November 11.[1]** Russian President Vladimir Putin had been determined to hold this key terrain, possession of which would have allowed him to renew his invasion of unoccupied Ukraine from positions on the west bank of the Dnipro River. That consideration was likely more important in Putin's calculations than the symbolic value of retaining the only oblast capital his forces had seized since February 24, 2022. (Russia had already taken Luhansk City and Donetsk City in its 2014-2015 invasion.) Putin had committed substantial Russian forces to the defense of western Kherson, including many of the remaining elite airborne units available to the Russian military.[2] He also committed reinforcements generated by the partial mobilization of reservists he had ordered on September 21.[3] Those forces had dug in and fought hard to hold their ground, taking many losses. Ukraine's success despite this Russian determination and allocation of scarce elite units is in many respects even more impressive than its victory in Kharkiv Oblast in mid-September.[4]

**Ukraine's success resulted in large part from the Ukrainian Armed Forces' (UAF's) innovative use of the US-provided HIMARS precision rocket system to disrupt Russian supply lines.** The HIMARS munitions the US has given Ukraine are not suitable for destroying bridges—their warheads are too small and are not optimized for such strikes. The UAF developed a tactic to work around that limitation by conducting multiple precision strikes across the key Antonivskiy Bridge and the road that ran atop the Kakhovka Dam in such a way as to break the roadways in a line across them, rendering them unusable without actually destroying the bridges' infrastructure (or badly damaging the dam).[5] The UAF continued to strike the bridges as the Russians sought to repair them, targeting the repair equipment as well as the roadways until the Russians finally gave up. The Russians attempted to construct a pontoon bridge under the Antonivskiy Bridge as a mitigation, but the UAF attacked that effort as well, causing the Russians to abandon it.[6] The Russians were left at the end with barges ferrying supplies, equipment, and reinforcements from the east to the west bank.[7] The UAF attacked the barges and landing areas as well, but the ferry system was in any case insufficient to supply the 20,000-some Russian mechanized troops trying to hold their lodgment on the western bank of the river.[8]

It was clear that the Russians would be unable to defend that lodgment by the time Russian Army General Sergey Surovikin took command of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on October 8.[9] Surovikin signaled his intention to withdraw from western Kherson almost immediately and likely began setting conditions to retreat within a couple of weeks.[10] It is not clear whether Putin authorized Surovikin to abandon western Kherson fully at that time or whether Surovikin had to continue working to persuade Putin of the hopelessness of any effort to hold on in western Kherson. However that may be, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu met with Surovikin on November 9 in a staged, public setting and ordered him to withdraw, which Surovikin promptly did.[11]

**Putin likely elevated Surovikin and let him withdraw from western Kherson on condition that he take the rest of Donetsk Oblast using Russian forces recouped from western Kherson as well as newly-arriving mobilized servicemen.[12]** This observation offered by Andriy Zagorodnyuk, chairman of the Ukrainian Center of Defense Strategies, is the likeliest explanation for the resumption in the intensity of Russian offensive operations first around Bakhmut and then to the southwest around the Vuhledar area that began on October 28.[13] These offensive efforts otherwise make little operational sense. They are far from operationally significant locations apart from Bakhmut and were launched during a difficult muddy time by inadequately prepared mobilized servicemen before Russian commanders in the area had amassed enough combat power for decisive operations.[14] Surovikin likely ordered them to start when they did as an earnest sign of his commitment to Putin.

**Russian offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast will intensify in the coming weeks as additional mobilized servicemen arrive along with forces withdrawn from western Kherson.** Ukrainian forces in the area will find themselves hard-pressed, and Kyiv will very likely have to divert troops to defend

against these renewed Russian offensives. The Russians are not likely to make operationally significant gains despite their renewed efforts, although they could conceivably take Bakhmut over time at enormous cost. Russian mobilized servicemen have shown themselves to be inadequately trained, poorly equipped, and very reluctant to fight.<sup>[15]</sup> They are not arriving in cohesive units but rather are being sent largely as individual or small unit replacements to units that have been fighting without rest for nine months, have suffered devastating losses in men and equipment, and are largely demoralized themselves.

Russian forces operating in Donetsk Oblast include conventional units of the regular Russian Armed Forces, mobilized servicemen, Wagner Private Military Company troops, BARS (Russian volunteer reserve) formations, militia units from the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, soldiers from Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechen units, and volunteer battalions.<sup>[16]</sup> This bizarre congeries of combat forces will have considerably less effective combat power than would a grouping of regular units of similar size. It is extremely unlikely that Surovkin will be able to forge it into a force able to conduct large-scale offensive mechanized maneuver warfare, particularly since he is not even taking (or being allowed to take) the time to build a coherent strike force before hurling it into the attack. This weird mix of forces will likely make some gains through sheer weight of numbers, but Ukrainian defenders, likely reinforced, will most probably force it to a halt over the next few months not far from its starting points.

**Ukraine will also likely recoup combat power from western Kherson and redeploy it to other areas for both defensive and counter-offensive operations.** The UAF could conceivably try to chase the Russians across the Dnipro River at various points but is unlikely to do so because the logistics of supporting a Ukrainian lodgment on the eastern bank are very daunting. The UAF is therefore more likely to consolidate its control of the western bank, leave enough force to deter any Russian attempt to cross the river again, and reallocate forces to other areas. The Russian offensive in Donetsk Oblast will likely require the UAF to divert some forces to defend in that area, but the UAF will likely send at least part of the recouped combat power either to reinforce its ongoing counter-offensive in Luhansk Oblast or to open another counter-offensive somewhere else (we will not speculate about where that might be).

**Ukrainian forces have continued to make limited gains in Luhansk Oblast and will likely be able to make more gains if they are reinforced by troops from western Kherson.** The Russians are also reinforcing their defensive positions in Luhansk Oblast, to be sure, but the UAF has been grinding forward nevertheless, and there is no reason to forecast that the ill-trained, ill-equipped, and low-morale Russian reservists will be able to stop Ukrainian troops, buoyed by their victories, from advancing.

**A cessation or prolonged slowing of combat operations over the next few months is therefore very unlikely.** The Russians are emphatically not attempting to establish and strengthen defensive positions all along the line but are rather renewing offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[17]</sup> The Ukrainians will almost certainly continue their counter-offensive operations already underway. Both sides are already fighting in very muddy conditions. They will not likely stop fighting when winter freezes the ground and makes it even more conducive to large-scale mechanized maneuver warfare. **Combat is more likely to intensify than to slacken as temperatures drop.**

**Any attempt at a ceasefire or cessation of hostilities at this time would overwhelmingly favor Russia.** Putin should desire such a ceasefire in his own interest. He should recognize that he needs to give his forces time to recover and allow the reservists flowing into the theater time to integrate into their units, train up, and prepare for serious combat. He should want to stop the Ukrainians from capitalizing on the emotional lift of their recent victories. The fact that Putin continues to whip his generals to offensives in these circumstances is thus a grave error from a military perspective. It likely results from whatever psychological factors led Putin to order the invasion in the first place but also increasingly from Putin's need to show his toughness to the hardline faction led, at least in public, by Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Putin is unlikely to be willing to seek a ceasefire, therefore, unless it is accompanied by tremendous Ukrainian or international concessions.

**Napoleon famously quipped: Never interrupt your enemy whilst he is in the midst of making a mistake. That aphorism has never been truer—Ukraine and its backers should take advantage of Putin's error by continuing to press the counter-offensive in circumstances far more favorable to Kyiv than to Moscow.**

**Ukraine has by no means liberated the minimum territory essential to its future security and economic survival even with the victory in western Kherson, finally.** The city of Melitopol and surrounding areas, the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, land on the east bank of the lower Dnipro River, and territory in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts are all vital terrain for Ukraine, as ISW has previously argued.<sup>[18]</sup> Discussions about the future of Crimea and other Ukrainian lands illegally occupied by

Russia after 2014 are premature. Ukraine must liberate tens of thousands of square kilometers short of those areas if it is to be able to defend itself against future Russian attacks and reestablish a functional economy.

**Ukrainians and the West must bend every effort to enabling the liberation of those lands as rapidly as possible before worrying about what lies beyond them. Momentum is an important factor in war. Ukraine has it now. Kyiv and its partners must make the most of it.**



### Key inflections in ongoing military operations on November 13:

- Wagner Group Financer Yevgeny Prigozhin asked the Russian Prosecutor General's Office to open a case against St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov for high treason amid viral

- footage of Wagner forces murdering one of their own.[19] Prigozhin and Russian nationalist milbloggers largely supported the murder of the alleged traitor.[20]
- The Russian military grouping stationed in Belarus continues to generate social tensions among Belarusians.[21]
  - Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kreminna and Svatove.[22]
  - Ukrainian forces continued to consolidate control over the right bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.[23] Ukrainian forces struck a Russian military base in Chaplynka, Kherson Oblast, 50km south of Beryslav on the eastern bank of the Dnipro.[24]
  - Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations in the directions of Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar.[25] The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Russian forces captured Mayorsk, southeast of Bakhmut.[26]
  - Russian forces continued routine indirect fire against frontline settlements in Zaporizhia and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts.[27] Russian forces struck Zaporizhzhia City with an Iskander missile.[28]
  - Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov announced that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the demobilization of mobilized students in Russian-occupied Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, likely as part of an ongoing effort to integrate proxy forces into the Russian Armed Forces.[29]
  - Russian forces and occupation officials are forcibly mobilizing men in Russian-occupied Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, and forcing them to construct trenches and defensive fortifications in the city.[30]
  - Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces are withdrawing from the left bank of the Dnipro River and concentrating forces and equipment in Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, and Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast.[31]
  - Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed an amendment to a draft law that would allow Russian officials to revoke Russian citizenship for disseminating “false” information about the Russian military, participating in extremist or undesirable organizations, or calling for violations of Russian “territorial integrity.”[32]

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 13, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 12 Click here to read the full report.

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan  
November 12, 7:30 ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russia's withdrawal from Kherson City is igniting an ideological fracture between pro-war figures and Russian President Vladimir Putin, eroding confidence in Putin's commitment and ability to deliver his war promises.** A pro-war Russian ideologist, Alexander Dugin, openly criticized Putin—whom he referred to as the autocrat—for failing to uphold Russian ideology by surrendering Kherson City on November 12.[1] Dugin said this Russian ideology defines Russia's responsibility to defend "Russian cities" such as Kherson, Belgorod, Kursk, Donetsk, and Simferopol. Dugin noted that an autocrat has a responsibility to save his nation all by himself or face the fate of "king of the rains," a reference to Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* in which a king was killed because he was unable to deliver rain amidst a drought. Dugin also downplayed the role of Putin's advisors in failing to protect the Russian world and noted that the commander of Russian Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovikin was not responsible for the political decision to withdraw from Kherson City. Dugin noted that the autocrat cannot repair this deviation from ideology merely with public appearances, noting that "the authorities in Russia cannot surrender anything else" and that "the limit has been reached." He also accused the presidential administration of upholding a "fake" ideology because of its fear of committing to the "Russian Idea." Dugin also made a reference to the use of tactical nuclear weapons, which he vaguely stated was "the end" and proceeded to note that overdue Russian changes to the military campaign have not generated any effect to change the course of the war. He also suggested, however, that Russia must commit to the Russian Idea rather than pursuing the "stupid" use of nuclear weapons.

**Putin is having a harder time appeasing parts of the highly ideological pro-war constituency due to his military's inability to deliver his maximalist goals of overthrowing the Ukrainian government and seizing all of Ukraine, as ISW has previously assessed.[2]** Putin's nationalist-leaning propagandists such as Vladimir Solovyov are increasingly demanding that the Kremlin and higher military command to fully commit to their goals in Ukraine, and Solovyov even called for full mobilization and the firing of incompetent officials following the Russian surrender of Kherson City.[3] Select milbloggers have previously criticized Putin for his failure to respond to the attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge on October 9, while others noted that Putin has failed to uphold the ideology of Russian superiority since 2014.[4] Direct criticism of Putin within the pro-war community is almost unprecedented, and Dugin's high-profile and unhinged attack on Putin may indicate a shift among the Russian nationalist ideologues.[5] Putin needs to retain the support of this community and has likely ordered some of his propagandists to suppress any critiques of the Russian withdrawal from Kherson City, since many state TV news programs have been omitting or downplaying the aftermath of withdrawal.[6] **The ever-increasing doubts among extreme Russian nationalists about Putin's commitment to Russian ideology reduce Putin's appeal to the nationalist community, while mobilization and high casualties will likely continue to upset members of the Russian society.**

**Wagner-affiliated channels are also turning on the Kremlin following the loss of Kherson Oblast, which may further elevate the influence of the siloviki faction.** Some milbloggers implied that the Kremlin has betrayed Kherson City by "selling out," while others noted that the Kremlin has consistently surrendered its territories without asking the Russian people.[7] Other milbloggers further questioned the legitimacy of the claimed 87% support rate for Russian annexation of Kherson Oblast.[8] Wagner Group financier Yevheny Prigozhin and some milbloggers have previously discussed the possibility of "Russia's civil society" stepping up to defend Russia.[9] The growing criticism of the decision to withdraw from western Kherson contrasts with the general support for the decision among the milblogger community before today.

**Russian officials are increasingly normalizing the public and likely illegal deportation of thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia.** Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova publicized the illegal kidnapping of 52 medically fragile Ukrainian children from Kherson Oblast to an unspecified "safe" area in Russia on November 12, likely under a medical relocation scheme that Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Ambassador to Russia Rodion Miroshnik confirmed had started on November 5.[10] High level Kremlin officials, including Lvova-Belova and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin have publicly acknowledged and praised the relocation of thousands of Ukrainian children to live with Russian families or in Russian facilities in recent weeks.[11] Russian Zaporizhia Oblast occupation officials have made public statements in recent weeks about the planned forced relocation of over 40,000 Kherson Oblast children to Russia and acknowledged on November 12 that their systems for caring for Ukrainian children are inadequate.[12] Russian and Ukrainian sources have previously reported that Russian and occupation officials have deported Ukrainian children to Russia under education, vacation, and other schemes within the past 10 days.[13] Such frequent and

public acknowledgements are a stark contrast to the first Russian official confirmation of such actions on August 23, when Krasnodar Krai authorities deleted an announcement about the arrival of 300 adoptable Ukrainian children from Mariupol and denied ever issuing the statement.[14] As ISW has noted and will continue to observe, the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia represents a possible violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[15] Russian military leadership is trying and largely failing to integrate combat forces drawn from many different organizations and of many different types and levels of skill and equipment into a more cohesive fighting force in Ukraine. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian officials stopped the distribution of Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) documents, including documents regarding the participation of DNR and LNR forces in combat, on November 11.[16] Russian authorities also ordered Southern Military District commanders to centralize payments to DNR and LNR fighters through Russian financial institutions and offered DNR and LNR soldiers the option to continue their service as contract servicemembers under Russian law.[17] These efforts will likely increase friction between Russian officials and LNR and DNR officials due to the exclusion of DNR and LNR officials from the process. DNR and LNR servicemembers reportedly feel pressured to accept Russian contracts and have expressed fears that refusal of the new Russian contracts would lead to the annulment of their documents and termination of DNR/LNR benefits.[18] ISW has previously reported bureaucratic conflict between DNR, LNR, and Russian authorities over administrative structures in occupied areas.[19]

**The lack of structure inherent in the combination of DNR forces, LNR forces, Russian contract servicemembers, Russian regional volunteer servicemembers, Russian mobilized servicemembers, and Wagner Group Private Military Company (PMC) forces creates an environment that fosters intra-force conflict.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on November 12 that tense relations between mobilized soldiers and Chechen volunteer soldiers triggered a brawl in Makiivka that injured three.[20]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russia's withdrawal from Kherson City is igniting an ideological fracture between pro-war figures and Russian President Vladimir Putin, eroding confidence in Putin's commitment to and ability to deliver on his war promises.
- Russian officials are increasingly normalizing the public and likely illegal deportation of thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia.
- The Russian military leadership is trying and failing to integrate ad hoc military formations into a more cohesive fighting force in Ukraine.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kreminna and Svatove.
- Ukrainian forces continued to liberate settlements on the right (western) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the direction of Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar.
- Russian officials may be trying to avoid providing military personnel with promised payments.
- Russian forces and occupation officials continue to endanger residents and subject them to coercive measures.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 11**

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan  
November 11, 6pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian forces are completing the liberation of the western (right) bank of Kherson Oblast after the Russians retreated from it. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces completed the withdrawal to the eastern (left) bank of the Dnipro River at 5am local time on November

11.[1] While contingents of Russian soldiers likely remain on the west bank, they are likely scattered throughout the Oblast and attempting to retreat as Ukrainian forces push towards the Dnipro River, although some may have remained behind to attempt to conduct partisan activities in small groups. It is unclear how many Russian soldiers remain on the west bank at this time. Russian sources noted that the withdrawal lasted three days and claimed that 20,000 Russian personnel and 3,500 units of military equipment moved across the Dnipro River.[2]

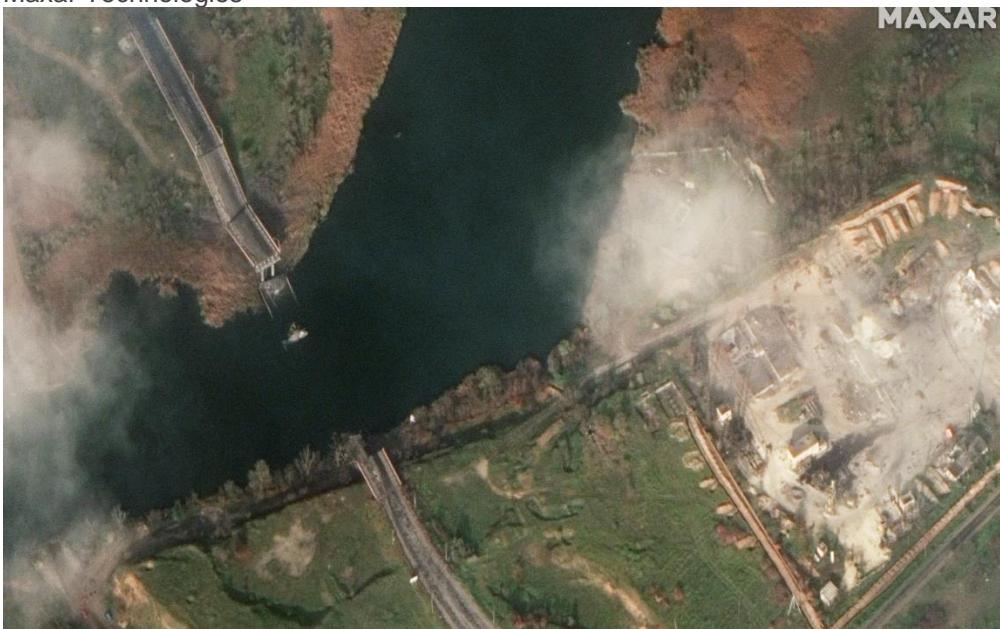
Satellite imagery corroborates statements made by both Ukrainian and Russian sources that Russian troops destroyed the Antonivsky Bridge and Railway Bridge (near Kherson City) and the Nova Kakhovka dam bridge (east of Kherson City near Nova Kakhovka) over the Dnipro River and the Darivka Bridge (northeast of Kherson City) over the Inhulets River in a final attempt to block Ukrainian advances towards central Kherson Oblast (see images in-line with text).[3] Geolocated satellite imagery also indicates that Russian troops have prepared first and second lines of defense south of the Dnipro River and will likely continue efforts to consolidate positions on the left bank in the coming days.[4]



Overview of the damage to the Antonivsky Bridge on November 11. Source: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies



Overview of damage to the Antonivsky Railway Bridge on November 11. Source: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies



Overview of damage to the Darivka Bridge on November 11. Source: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies



Closer view of damage to the damaged section of the Nova Kakhovka dam on November 11. Source: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies

**Ukrainian troops made major territorial gains throughout Kherson Oblast on November 11 and will continue consolidating control of the western bank in the coming days.** Geolocated footage and imagery shows that Ukrainian forces have advanced into Kherson City likely along the T1501 highway from the west and M14 from the north and have taken control of Kherson City and several surrounding settlements along these roads.[5] The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) notably confirmed that Ukrainian troops advanced into Kherson City, and geolocated social media footage shows civilians greeting Ukrainian troops in the center of Kherson City.[6] Ukrainian troops also notably took control of Kyselivka and Chornobaivka, two critical settlements along the M14 northwest of Kherson City.[7] Geolocated social media additionally shows that Ukrainian troops have advanced south along T1505 highway from positions in Snihurivka (northeast of the Kherson-Mykolaiv Oblast border) and liberated several settlements on this line, including Lymanets and Inhulets.[8] Ukrainian forces entered Beryslav (60km east of Kherson City), and social media footage provides evidence of Ukrainian troops in settlements along the P47 highway that runs westward from the Beryslav area towards Kherson City.[9] Footage posted to Telegram notably shows Ukrainian troops in Tiahynka, a settlement between Kherson City and Beryslav, directly on the western shore of the Dnipro River.[10] Ukrainian forces will continue to drive down major roads towards the Dnipro River and liberate additional settlements in the coming days.

**ISW has recorded all western Kherson Oblast as liberated based on our high confidence assessment that the Russians have deprived themselves of the ability to hold terrain on the right bank of the Dnipro. Ukrainian forces will complete the liberation of any areas not yet under their control rapidly.**

**Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian MoD's statements about the Russian withdrawal to the left bank but generally took a more muted attitude to Ukrainian gains on November 11.** The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces did not leave a single piece of equipment behind during the withdrawal period, which certain milbloggers directly refuted as blatantly untrue.[11] Many milbloggers, however, presented a relatively matter-of-fact overview of the situation in Kherson Oblast, largely confirmed Ukrainian gains, and emphasized that the retreat itself was a militarily-sound and necessary choice.[12] As ISW previously reported, Russian military leadership, namely Commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovikin, have been developing informational cover to set conditions for the loss of the right bank.[13] The generally muted milblogger response to such a massive Russian defeat is consistent with ISW's previous observations of informational mitigations carried out by Surovikin and suggests that milbloggers will continue to focus their discontent on the Russian MoD establishment while backing Surovikin — at least for now.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian forces are completing the liberation of the western (right) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian troops have made major territorial gains throughout Kherson Oblast on November 11 and will continue consolidating control of the western bank in the coming days.
- Russian milbloggers criticized the Russian MoD's statements about the Russian withdrawal to the left bank but generally took a more muted attitude to Ukrainian gains.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations towards Kreminna and Svatove, Luhansk Oblast, and Ukrainian forces targeted Russian logistics in rear Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued ground assaults around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar.
- Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian force concentrations in Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Wagner Group financer Yevgeny Prigozhin continued to form parallel military structures in Belgorod and Kursk oblasts, even though there is no threat of a Ukrainian ground invasion into Russian territory.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) subpar conduct of partial mobilization continues to generate social tension.
- Ukrainian partisans continued to target Russian occupation authorities.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 11, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 10

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Katherine Lawlor, and Mason Clark

November 10, 8pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces steadily advanced in Kherson Oblast on November 10 as Russian forces conduct a withdrawal to the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.** Ukrainian military officials and geolocated social media footage confirm that Ukrainian troops have made gains northwest, west, and northeast of Kherson City in the past 24 hours and advanced up to 7km in some areas.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian forces so far appear to be withdrawing in relatively good order, and Ukrainian forces are making expected gains without routing Russian forces, as they did in the Kharkiv counteroffensive. Ukrainian strikes since August have successfully degraded Russian supply lines on the west (right) bank to force Russian forces to withdraw and will liberate Kherson Oblast to the Dnipro River in the coming days or weeks. The Russian withdrawal will take some time to complete, and fighting will continue throughout Kherson Oblast as Ukrainian troops advance and come up against pre-prepared Russian defensive lines, especially around Kherson City.

**ISW does not assess the fighting in Ukraine will halt or enter a stalemate due to winter weather, despite faulty Western assumptions.** NBC News reported on November 9 that some US and Western defense officials are eyeing an “expected winter slowdown in fighting as an opportunity for diplomacy to begin between Russia and Ukraine.”<sup>[2]</sup> Autumn and springtime mud can slow or halt military advances, as can faulty or insufficient wintertime equipment. Some military equipment may need to be adapted for colder weather, and shortages of equipment or ammunition could slow advances due to logistical difficulties — not winter weather.<sup>[3]</sup> Winter weather could disproportionately harm poorly-equipped Russian forces in Ukraine, but well-supplied Ukrainian forces are unlikely to halt their counteroffensives due to the arrival of winter weather and may be able to take advantage of frozen terrain to move more easily than they could in the muddy autumn months. If fighting does halt this winter, it will be due to logistical challenges and the culmination of several campaigns on both sides. The Russian campaigns to capture all of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts all culminated months ago (despite the repeated insistence of Russian forces on launching ineffective attacks), and Russian forces are firmly on the defensive across most of the frontline.

**Ukraine holds the initiative and is in the process of securing a major victory in Kherson. A ceasefire would provide the Kremlin with the pause it desperately needs to reconstitute Russian forces.** The major Ukrainian victory underway in Kherson Oblast will not be Ukraine’s last. Fighting will continue on the southern axis; in Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast (the only place Russian forces are still attempting meaningful offensives); and in northern Luhansk Oblast as Ukrainian forces continue counteroffensive operations. Russian officials are busy attempting to train 120,000 conscripts to deploy to the frontlines in the spring.<sup>[4]</sup> Ukrainian forces likely aim to liberate as much occupied territory as possible before those Russian reinforcements arrive. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced on November 7 that Ukraine is unwilling to negotiate with Russian forces until certain conditions are met, including the restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity, the prosecution of Russian war criminals, payment for war damages, and promises that Russia will not again invade Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> A wintertime ceasefire would only benefit Russian forces, who would use that opportunity to bolster their faltering defenses and continue their genocidal campaign to eradicate Ukrainian identity in occupied parts of Ukraine.

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin is increasingly wrestling with St. Petersburg officials over expanding Wagner Group operations in the city.** Prigozhin’s press service stated that St. Petersburg officials refused to provide a permit for the newly opened Wagner Center in St. Petersburg on a technicality.<sup>[6]</sup> The press service noted that St. Petersburg officials are deliberately refusing to issue the permit based on their “ideological” differences, given that Wagner received the permission to construct the center in July.<sup>[7]</sup> The press service added that Wagner had petitioned the court and will take the issue further if the court recognizes St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov and his government have committed any “crimes.”<sup>[8]</sup> Prigozhin also accused Beglov and other St. Petersburg “liberal” businessmen of financially supporting Ukrainian “nationalists” and betraying Russia in response to the situation.<sup>[9]</sup> Prigozhin has previously accused Beglov of failing to support the Russian war effort and demanded his resignation, likely as a result of resistance from Beglov on expanding Wagner’s presence in St. Petersburg.<sup>[10]</sup> ISW also reported that a Russian nationalist outlet *Pravda.Ru*, which consistently reports on Prigozhin-related news, published a defamatory piece on Beglov’s uninterest in creating volunteer battalions in August.<sup>[11]</sup> Prigozhin is increasingly weaponizing his role in the Russian invasion of Ukraine to push his business aspirations.

**Ukrainian Air Force Command spokesperson Yuriy Ignat stated that Russian forces will likely further reduce the pace of their campaign to strike Ukrainian critical infrastructure, likely enabling**

**Ukrainian authorities to address most of the damage to infrastructure.** Ignat announced on November 10 that on the night of November 9 to 10 Russian forces did not conduct any air or cruise missile strikes on Ukrainian critical infrastructure facilities.[12] Ignat stated that Russian forces have begun to stockpile high-precision weapons systems to launch a future massive campaign reminiscent of the October 10 strikes, because small numbers of daily cruise missile and drone strikes are now generating few results.[13] Ignat stated Russian forces spent months accumulating the high-precision weapons systems they used in the October campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.[14] ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces have greatly depleted their arsenal of high-precision weapons systems and have suffered significant aviation losses and therefore would struggle to maintain the pace of their campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure.[15] It will likely take Russian forces months to accumulate the number of high-precision weapons systems needed to return to the pace of strikes it conducted in mid-October despite Ignat's reporting that Russian factories are drastically increasing the manufacturing of cruise missiles.[16] Ukrainian officials have previously stated that they could restore energy supplies to communities in Ukraine within a matter of a few weeks if the pace of the Russian campaign dramatically slowed.[17] ISW also assessed that Russian President Vladimir Putin may have ordered the campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure to curry favor with the Russian pro-war nationalist camp that has been consistently demanding escalation in Ukraine.[18] A reduced pace in the campaign will likely contribute to renewed criticisms from the pro-war nationalist camp. Russian forces likely retain the capability to damage Ukrainian critical infrastructure and impose costs on Ukrainian civilians in the winter but are unlikely to be able to inflict decisive — and lasting — damage.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian forces steadily advanced in Kherson Oblast on November 10 as Russian forces conduct a withdrawal to the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.
- The Russian withdrawal will take some time to complete, and fighting will continue throughout Kherson Oblast as Ukrainian troops advance and come up against pre-prepared Russian defensive lines, especially around Kherson City.
- ISW does not assess the fighting in Ukraine will halt or enter a stalemate due to winter weather, despite faulty Western assumptions.
- Ukraine holds the initiative and is in the process of securing a major victory in Kherson. A ceasefire would provide the Kremlin with the pause it desperately needs to reconstitute Russian forces.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin is increasingly wrestling with St. Petersburg officials over expanding Wagner Group recruitment in the city.
- Ukrainian Air Force Command spokesperson Yuriy Ignat stated that Russian force will likely slow the pace of their campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure.
- Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations on the Svatove-Kremenna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and in western Donetsk.
- Russian forces began constructing second line fortifications in Crimea and southern Ukraine.
- Russian citizens continue to oppose Russia's war in Ukraine through protest, social media dissent, and desertions from the military.
- Russian mobilization efforts are channeling personnel to the Wagner group.
- Russian occupation officials are continuing efforts to erode Ukrainian national identity while mobilizing residents in Russian-occupied territories.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 10, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 9 Click here to read the full report.

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Nicholas Carl, and Mason Clark

November 9, 9:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) ordered Russian forces on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River to begin withdrawing to the east (left) bank on November 9.** Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu ordered the withdrawal of Russian troops across the Dnipro River during a highly staged televised meeting with Commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergey Surovikin on November 9. During the televised meeting, Surovikin recommended the withdrawal and Shoigu accepted his decision, giving Surovikin the task of ensuring the “safe transfer of personnel, weapons, and equipment” to the east (left) bank.<sup>[1]</sup> Shoigu and Surovikin’s statements mark the beginning of a steady, fighting withdrawal by Russian troops across the Dnipro to prepared positions on the east (left) bank to preserve the combat power of Russian units, including elements of the 76th and 106th Airborne Assault Divisions and 22nd Army Corps.<sup>[2]</sup> Surovikin notably stated that half of the troops withdrawn from the west bank of the Dnipro will be redeployed to other areas of Ukraine. The entire Russian contingent will take some time to withdraw across the Dnipro River and it is still unclear if Russian forces will be able to conduct the withdrawal in relatively good order under Ukrainian pressure. **The battle of Kherson is not over, but Russian forces have entered a new phase—prioritizing withdrawing their forces across the river in good order and delaying Ukrainian forces, rather than seeking to halt the Ukrainian counteroffensive entirely.**

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive in the Kherson direction since August—a coordinated interdiction campaign to force Russian forces to withdraw across the Dnipro without necessitating major Ukrainian ground offensives—has likely succeeded.** As ISW has observed over the previous months, Ukrainian forces engaged in a purposeful and well-executed campaign to target Russian concentration areas, military assets, and logistics nodes throughout Kherson Oblast to make continued Russian positions on the west bank untenable without having to conduct large-scale and costly ground maneuvers to liberate territory.<sup>[3]</sup> Ukrainian troops launched constant attacks on bridges across the Dnipro River and targeted supply centers and ammunition depots on the east bank of the Dnipro that degraded the ability of Russian forces to supply the grouping on the west bank; Ukrainian forces combined these strikes with prudent and successful ground attacks on key locations such as Davydov Brid. This campaign has come to fruition. Surovikin directly acknowledged that Russian forces cannot supply their grouping in Kherson City and the surrounding areas due to Ukrainian strikes on critical Russian supply lines to the west bank.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian sources noted that the withdrawal is a natural consequence of targeted and systematic Ukrainian strikes that cost the Russian grouping on the west bank its major supply arteries, which gradually attrited their overall strength and capabilities.<sup>[5]</sup>

**The Russian withdrawal from the west bank of the Dnipro is unlikely to be a trap meant to lure Ukrainian troops into costly combat near Kherson City, as some Ukrainian and Western sources have suggested.**<sup>[6]</sup> ISW has previously observed many indicators that Russian forces, military and economic assets, and occupation elements have steadily withdrawn from the west bank across the Dnipro River, and Russian officials have been anticipating and preparing for withdrawal in a way that is incompatible with a campaign to deceive and trap Ukrainian troops.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian commanders will certainly attempt to slow Ukrainian advances to maintain an orderly withdrawal, and some forces may remain to delay Ukrainian troops in Kherson City itself—but this fighting will be a means to the end of withdrawing as many Russian units as possible in good order.

**The Russian information space predictably reacted to the announcement of the withdrawal with varying degrees of ire and concern.** Several Russian milbloggers emphasized that the withdrawal is the natural consequence of systematic failures within Russian military and command structures and framed the withdrawal as an inevitable result of political nuances beyond the realm of military control.<sup>[8]</sup> Russian sources also emphasized that this is a major defeat for Russian forces because they are losing territory that Russia annexed and claims as its own.<sup>[9]</sup>

**However, many prominent voices in the milblogger space sided with Surovikin and lauded the decision as a necessary one, indicating that Russian leadership has learned from the information effects of the disastrous Russian withdrawal from Kharkiv Oblast in mid-September.**<sup>[10]</sup> A prominent Russian milblogger that has previously stridently criticized the conduct of Russian operations stated that Surovikin “got the inheritance he got” managing operations in Kherson Oblast, and implied that Surovikin did the best he could under the circumstances, so he ultimately cannot be blamed.<sup>[11]</sup> Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin voiced his support for the withdrawal and called it the “greatest achievement” made by Surovikin due to Surovikin’s stated desire to preserve the safety of Russian troops.<sup>[12]</sup> Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov agreed with Prigozhin’s assessment and claimed Surovikin saved thousands of lives and is seeking more advantageous positions.<sup>[13]</sup> These responses, particularly

from Kadyrov and Prigozhin, are markedly different from scathing critiques previously leveled at Commander of the Grouping of Russian forces “Center” in Ukraine Colonel General Alexander Lapin following massive Russian losses in eastern Kharkiv and northern Donetsk oblasts.[14] Surovikin has steadily established an informational cover for his decision-making and the eventual Russian withdrawal from positions in Kherson Oblast since the announcement of his appointment as theatre commander of Russian Forces in Ukraine. Surovikin stated that Russian leadership will need to make “difficult decisions” regarding Kherson Oblast as early as October 19.[15] The Kremlin and senior Russian commanders appear to have learned informational and military lessons from previous failures and will likely apply these to the presentation and conduct of this withdrawal. Russian President Vladimir Putin has not commented on the withdrawal as of this publication, suggesting that the Kremlin is framing the withdrawal as a purely military decision.

**Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev met with senior Iranian officials in Tehran on November 9, likely to discuss the sale of Iranian ballistic missiles to Russia and other forms of cooperation.** Patrushev met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Iranian Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Ali Shamkhani.[16] The SNSC is Iran’s highest defense and security policy body and reports directly to the supreme leader. Iranian readouts of Patrushev’s meetings largely focused on economic and political cooperation, while Russian readouts emphasized that the discussion focused on security affairs.[17] Patrushev and Shamkhani discussed “measures to counter interference by Western secret services in the two countries’ internal affairs,” according to Russia’s TASS. Iranian officials have repeatedly accused the United States and its allies of stoking the ongoing protests throughout Iran.[18] Patrushev’s visit to Tehran notably comes amid reports that Iran is seeking Russian help with protest suppression, although it is unclear whether Patrushev discussed such cooperation.[19] Patrushev likely sought to secure additional Iranian precision munitions to replenish Russia’s dwindling stocks.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) ordered Russian forces on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River to begin withdrawing to the east (left) bank on November 9.
- The battle of Kherson is not inherently over, but Russian forces have entered a new phase—prioritizing withdrawing their forces across the river in good order and delaying Ukrainian forces, rather than seeking to halt the Ukrainian counteroffensive entirely.
- Many prominent voices in the Russian milblogger space sided with Surovikin and lauded the decision as a necessary one, indicating that Russian leadership has learned from the information effects of the disastrous Russian withdrawal from Kharkiv Oblast in mid-September.
- Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev met with senior Iranian officials in Tehran on November 9, likely to discuss the sale of Iranian ballistic missiles to Russia and other forms of cooperation
- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported continued fighting along the Svatove-Kremmina highway and Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces made territorial gains northeast of Kherson City and continued their successful interdiction campaign.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian federal subjects are struggling to pay mobilized personnel, and the Russian military is struggling to provision them.
- Relatives of mobilized personnel continue to protest lack of payment and poor conditions.
- Russian occupation deputy head of Kherson Oblast Kirill Stremousov was killed in a claimed car accident in rear Kherson Oblast the day Russian forces announced their withdrawal from the west bank of Kherson Oblast.
- Occupation authorities in rear areas are likely increasing law enforcement crackdowns and filtration measures amid fears of Ukrainian counteroffensives after the November 9 withdrawal announcement

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 8

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, Nicholas Carl, and Mason Clark

November 8, 7:45 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Iranian state-run outlet *Nour News Agency* reported that Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev arrived in Tehran on November 8, likely to discuss the potential sale of Iranian ballistic missiles to Russia.<sup>[1]</sup> *Nour News Agency* announced Patrushev's arrival in an English-language tweet, stating that Iranian Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Secretary Ali Shamkhani invited Patrushev and noted that Patrushev will also meet with other high-ranking Iranian political and economic officials to discuss Russo-Iranian cooperation.<sup>[2]</sup> *Nour News Agency* is affiliated with the SNSC. The SNSC likely announced Patrushev's arrival in Iran to highlight the deepening cooperation between Moscow and Tehran to an international audience (rather than domestically), as well as to implicitly highlight that a high-ranking Russian official turned to Iran for help in Ukraine. Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani notably traveled to Moscow in 2015 to appeal to Russia to intervene in the Syrian Civil War. Tehran is likely eager to publicly signal this rebalancing of its strategic partnership with Moscow, especially to regional Iranian adversaries with which the Kremlin occasionally cooperates, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.<sup>[3]</sup> Patrushev's visit to Iran notably comes amid reports that the Iranian regime is seeking Russian help with protest suppression, although it is unclear if this will be discussed by Patrushev and his Iranian counterpart.<sup>[4]</sup>

**The Kremlin is continuing efforts to covertly acquire munitions for use in Ukraine to mitigate the effects of international sanctions and backfill Russia's ongoing depletion of domestic munitions stockpiles.** British outlet Sky News reported on November 8 that the Kremlin flew 140 million euros in cash and a selection of captured British-made NLAW anti-tank missiles, US-made Javelin anti-tank missiles, and a Stinger anti-aircraft missile to Tehran on August 20 in exchange for 160 additional Shahed-136 drones for use in Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on November 8 that Tehran continues to supply Moscow with Mohajer, Arash, and Shahed-type drones by air and sea via both Iranian state-owned and privately-owned entities.<sup>[6]</sup> The Ukrainian Resistance Center additionally reported that due to failures of the Russian military-industrial complex, Russian military leaders are continuing their efforts to procure dual-use (military and non-military use) goods such as computer chips, quadcopters, night vision devices, and bulletproof vests from Turkey and are using cryptocurrency transactions to avoid purchase tracking.<sup>[7]</sup> Taken in tandem, these reports indicate that the Kremlin seeks to circumvent sanctions by engaging in quid-pro-quo and under-the-table negotiations with foreign actors.

**Wagner Group forces are continuing to exaggerate their claimed territorial gains in Donbas to further distinguish themselves from proxy and conventional Russian forces.** Russian sources began reporting on November 7 that a detachment of Wagner forces and troops of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) 6th Cossack Regiment broke through Ukrainian defensive lines in Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast.<sup>[8]</sup> On November 8, however, Russian coverage largely shifted and Russian milbloggers began claiming that reports of the 6th Cossack Regiment's involvement in operations near Bilohorivka are false and that Wagner troops were solely responsible for purported gains.<sup>[9]</sup> As ISW has previously observed, Wagner has taken sole credit for Russian gains around Bakhmut in order to bolster their own reputation as the Kremlin's favored strike force, despite not being the only force deployed in the area.<sup>[10]</sup> Wagner will likely use Bilohorivka to accomplish a similar effect.

### Key Takeaways

- Iranian sources announced—without Russian confirmation—that Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev arrived in Tehran on November 8, likely to discuss the potential sale of Iranian ballistic missiles to Russia. Iran likely announced Patrushev's arrival to highlight the deepening cooperation between Moscow and Tehran to an international audience, as well as to implicitly highlight that a high-ranking Russian official turned to Iran for help in Ukraine.

- Wagner Group forces are continuing to exaggerate their claimed territorial gains in Donbas to further distinguish themselves from proxy and conventional Russian forces.
- Ukrainian forces likely made marginal gains northwest of Svatove, Luhansk Oblast, and Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces intensified offensive operations toward Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian authorities attempted to counteract Russian authorities' continued efforts to strengthen control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- The disproportionate financial burden of Russian force generation efforts continues to fall primarily on Russian regional governments' budgets, prompting public backlash.
- Financial and bureaucratic issues are continuing to hinder Russian efforts to replenish formerly elite units defending critical areas of the front line, potentially threatening the integrity of Russian defenses in occupied parts of Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast may be trying to force residents out of the western part of the oblast by cutting communications on the west bank of the Dnipro River.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 7

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Madison Williams, and Mason Clark

November 7, 8pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) issued a rare statement on November 7 in response to extensive Russian milblogger outcry on November 6 about reported extensive losses and poor command within the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet. Russian milbloggers published and circulated a letter that claimed Russian military leadership "threw" the brigade into an "incomprehensible offensive" near Pavlivka, Donetsk Oblast, where it suffered losses amounting to over 300 killed, wounded, and missing and lost half of its equipment, all within four days. The letter explicitly blamed Eastern Military District Commander Lieutenant General Rustam Muradov, 155th Naval Infantry Brigade Commander Colonel Zurab Akhmedov, and Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov for the brigade's losses and called on Primorsky Krai Governor Oleg Kozhemyako to conduct an independent review of the actions of the officers involved in planning and conducting the recent Russian offensive push in western Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[1]</sup> The tone of many Russian milblogger responses to the letter resembles the response following the destruction of a Russian motorized rifle brigade crossing the Slverskyi Donets River on May 11, after which many pro-war milbloggers increased their direct criticism of the Russian military.<sup>[2]</sup>

The Russian MoD issued a rare response on November 7 to the outcry on and claimed that less than one percent of the brigade was killed and less than seven percent was wounded within the past 10 days, and that Ukrainian forces suffered high losses instead.<sup>[3]</sup> Kozhemyako also sought to address the outcry and claimed that the brigade's losses are greatly exaggerated and (without providing evidence) speculated that the letter was a product of Ukrainian special services.<sup>[4]</sup> Kozhemyako stated that he contacted the brigade's command and referred the case to the Russian military prosecutor.<sup>[5]</sup> Some Russian milbloggers agreed, claiming that Russian losses could not be as high as the brigade claimed, even calling the brigade's letter exaggerated or fake.<sup>[6]</sup> **The Russian MoD has remained remarkably tight-lipped about milblogger critiques of Russian failures throughout the war in Ukraine — unlike the Kremlin, which will occasionally indirectly address milblogger narratives. The MoD's public response to milblogger outcry indicates that some Russian milbloggers have considerable leverage to shape MoD interactions in the information space and additionally suggests that the situation in Pavlivka is dire enough to warrant a response.**

Discourse regarding the widespread failures of the Russian military establishment has pervaded beyond the milblogger information space and is increasingly coloring social dynamics. Russian milbloggers stated that women, presumably relatives of Russian military and mobilized personnel, have

been calling attention to the failing state of the war by reaching out to milbloggers and local government officials.[7] ISW has observed multiple instances of Russian military personnel's wives and mothers advocating for their relatives serving in the military by reaching out to local officials and prominent Russian milbloggers since the beginning of partial mobilization in late September.[8] The Russian MoD's failure to properly address these systemic issues and their root causes will likely exacerbate these societal tensions throughout the war.

**The Russian pro-war *siloviki* faction is increasing its influence in part to advance personal interests in Russia and occupied Ukraine, not strictly to win the war.** Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin confirmed on November 6 that Wagner is opening training and management centers for people's militias in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts that will function outside of the Russian Armed Forces.[9] ISW previously assessed that Prigozhin is undertaking efforts to strengthen his independent power base following his reported meeting with Kursk Oblast businessmen on the creation of regional people's militia that symbolically occurred on Russia's Unity Day (November 4).[10] Prigozhin emphasized that Russian officials must assign regional businesses the responsibility to supply the militia rather than relying on the Kremlin. Prigozhin's Unity Day media appearances also captured the same notion of cooperation between the Russian government and business, which likely indicates that he is attempting to grow his Wagner-focused power base in Russia while undercutting unified Russian operations in Ukraine. Prigozhin also started construction of an independent fortification dubbed the "Wagner Line" in Belgorod Oblast in late October.[11] Prigozhin consistently defames St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov, and the recent grand opening of the Wagner Center in St. Petersburg on Unity Day may suggest that Prigozhin is attempting to infiltrate the city's business sphere.[12] Another member of the *siloviki* party, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, is also reportedly attempting to secure business opportunities on the back of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Resistance Center noted that Kadyrov and his field commanders are growing business networks in the occupied territories, and Ukrainian officials previously claimed that Kadyrov's men received loot from Mariupol for their participation in the seizure of the city in March–April.[13] ISW cannot independently verify the validity of these Ukrainian statements, but Kadyrov is behaving in line with Prigozhin by advertising enlistment into his forces and undermining the formal Russian Armed Forces.[14] Kadyrov, for example, advertised his provision of military equipment to a proxy unit in occupied Donetsk Oblast on November 7; and Prigozhin similarly provided equipment to a Russian unit prior.[15] Both Prigozhin and Kadyrov remain independent figures within Russia due to Putin's dependency on their forces in Ukraine. Russian journalists often ask Prigozhin about his ambitions for the Kremlin, which despite his repeated denials, show that he has created a public perception of his possibly entering a position of power.[16] Such discussions deviate from Putin's decades-long positioning of himself as the only viable leader for Russia. Prigozhin also likely maintains his access to key Kremlin officials, and the Ukrainian Resistance Center even reported that he had an unofficial meeting with Putin's administration head Anton Vaino.[17] Prigozhin and Vaino allegedly discussed Putin's negative influence over the Russian military campaign and distaste for Russian higher military command. The existence of this meeting is impossible to confirm in open sources, but Western officials previously confirmed that Prigozhin directly addressed Putin regarding military failures in Ukraine in October.[18]

**Prigozhin is continuing to pose himself as a Russian strongman within foreign affairs by promoting his own engagement in election interference.** Prigozhin sarcastically acknowledged Bloomberg reports regarding his involvement in the US 2022 midterm elections, telling US government-funded outlet *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*: "Gentlemen, we interfered, we interfere and we will interfere."<sup>[19]</sup> Prigozhin's admission to a US publication a day prior to US elections on November 8 likely intends both to undermine public perception of the validity of election results and promote Prigozhin to a Russian audience as a capable actor — in line with Prigozhin's previous public admittance that he finances the Wagner Group, which he previously denied for years.

**Russian forces have greatly depleted their arsenal of high-precision weapons systems and have suffered significant aviation losses and will likely struggle to maintain the current pace of the Russian military's coordinated campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.** Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces General Valeryi Zaluzhnyi stated on November 3 that Ukrainian forces have destroyed 278 aircraft compared to the Soviet Union's loss of 119 aircraft during 10 years of war in Afghanistan.<sup>[20]</sup> The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on November 7 that

Russian forces are unlikely to replace these aviation losses in the next few months because they likely significantly outstrip Russian capacity to manufacture new airframes.[21] Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Vadym Skitbitsky stated in a comment to the *Economist* on November 7 that Russian forces have used more than eighty percent of their modern missiles in the coordinated campaign to strike Ukrainian infrastructure and that Russian forces only have 120 Iskander missiles left.[22] ISW previously assessed that Russia has depleted its arsenal of high-precision weapon systems in its campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure, which is intended to degrade Ukrainian popular will (but is highly unlikely to succeed).[23] Ukrainian sources reported on November 7 that Ukrainian officials and engineers could restore power supplies to normal levels in a few weeks if the pace of Russian strikes on critical infrastructure dramatically slowed.[24] Skitbitsky also reported that Russian officials have reached an agreement with Iranian officials to purchase Fateh-110 and Zolfaghar ballistic missile systems.[25] ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces are increasingly reliant on Iranian-made weapon systems to support its coordinated strike campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.[26]

**Russian occupation authorities are likely beginning a new phase of evacuations from Kherson Oblast.** Kherson occupation deputy Kirill Stremousov stated that November 7 will be the last day of organized evacuations from the west bank of the Dnipro River.[27] A Russian milblogger similarly noted that November 7 is the end of centralized evacuations in Kherson Oblast and that private evacuates will continue from November 8.[28] Russian sources reported that the last boat transporting civilians from Kherson City to the east bank of the Dnipro departed on November 8 due to concerns of “increased threats to the civilian population.”[29] The purported shift from centralized to privatized evacuation efforts suggests that Russian occupation officials have completed evacuation under formal guidelines and will increasingly continue evacuations from areas in Kherson Oblast on a more *ad hoc* and case-by-case basis. Russian officials may also be setting further information conditions to accuse Ukrainian forces of endangering civilian life by framing the end of centralized, administration-led evacuations as necessary to protect civilians.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) issued a rare statement on November 7 in response to extensive Russian milblogger outcry about reported extensive losses and poor command within the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet.
- The Russian pro-war *siloviki* faction (including Yevgeny Prigozhin and Ramzan Kadyrov) is increasing its influence in part to advance personal interests in Russia and occupied Ukraine, not strictly to win the war.
- Russian forces have greatly depleted their arsenal of high-precision weapons systems and have suffered significant aviation losses and will likely struggle to maintain the current pace of the Russian military’s coordinated campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.
- Russian occupation authorities likely began a new phase of evacuations from Kherson Oblast.
- Russian troops continued efforts to fix Ukrainian troops against the international border in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian troops continued counteroffensive operations in the Svatove direction.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian troops conducted limited counterattacks to regain lost positions west of Kremminna.
- Russian sources widely claimed that proxy and Wagner Group troops entered the outskirts of Bilohorivka.
- Russian sources reported that Ukrainian troops are massing in the Kherson Oblast direction.
- Russian troops continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces conducted limited interdiction efforts against Russian concentration areas in Zaporizhzhia Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to make public statements and signed additional decrees to portray himself as taking steps to fix fundamental problems with partial mobilization in Russia.
- Russian and occupation officials continue to abduct Ukrainian children, intimidate civilians, and escalate filtration measures.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 7, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



Kateryna Stepanenko and Mason Clark  
[Click here to read the full report.](#)

November 6, 7:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, November 6. This report discusses the recent reduction of nuclear threats by key Kremlin figures and the likely role of Russia's military leadership and the international community in prompting this change, and the risks of further Russian nuclear saber rattling.

**Key Kremlin officials began collectively deescalating their rhetoric regarding the use of nuclear weapons in early November.** The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) released a statement on “the prevention of nuclear war” on November 2, stating that Russia “is strictly and consistently guided by the postulate of the inadmissibility of a nuclear war in which there can be no winners, and which must never be unleashed.” The Russian MFA also stated that it is committed to the reduction and limitation of nuclear weapons.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on October 27 that Russia has no need to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine and claimed Russia has never discussed the possibility of using nuclear weapons, only “hinting at the statements made by leaders of Western countries.”<sup>[2]</sup> The deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, has similarly increasingly downplayed the fiery nuclear rhetoric he used throughout October and is now focusing on promoting Russian unity in the war in Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup>

**Putin and key Kremlin officials had increased their references to the use of nuclear weapons from Putin’s September 30 annexation speech and throughout October, likely to pressure Ukraine into negotiations and to reduce Western support for Kyiv.** Putin made several general references to nuclear weapons in his September 30 speech but avoided directly threatening the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>[4]</sup> Putin’s rhetoric during this speech and throughout October was consistent with his previous nuclear threats and failed to generate the degree of fear within the Ukrainian government that the Kremlin likely intended.<sup>[5]</sup> Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated on October 24 that the Russian nuclear threat has remained at the same level even prior to the start of the war.<sup>[6]</sup> The Kremlin also escalated its nuclear rhetoric after Russian military failures in Kharkiv Oblast and during Ukrainian counteroffensives in Lyman and northern Kherson Oblast in early October. The Kremlin likely continued its thinly veiled nuclear threats to deflect from their military and mobilization problems and to intimidate Ukraine’s Western partners.

**The Kremlin’s rhetorical shift indicates that senior Russian military commanders and elements of the Kremlin are likely to some extent aware of the massive costs for little operational gain Russia would incur for the use of nuclear weapons against Ukraine or NATO.** The *New York Times*, citing senior US officials, reported that senior Russian defense officials discussed the conditions for nuclear use against the backdrop of growing nuclear narratives in mid-October.<sup>[7]</sup> The meeting reportedly did not involve Putin. Putin’s illegal September 30 annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts, much of which Russian forces do not occupy, likely overcomplicated existing Russian military doctrine. Russian nuclear doctrine clearly allows for nuclear weapons use in response to “aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy,” which the Kremlin could conceivably apply to Ukrainian advances into claimed “Russian” territory in Ukraine.<sup>[8]</sup> All of the current frontlines fall within claimed Russian territory, and Putin has not publicly defined what now constitutes an attack on Russian territory. It is possible that senior Russian military officials are equally confused about the application of Putin’s annexation order to existing military doctrine. ISW previously reported that Putin’s annexation order was likely a polarizing issue that ignited a fracture within the Kremlin, creating pro-war and pro-negotiations factions.<sup>[9]</sup> US officials also noted that they have not observed any indicators that Russia has moved its nuclear weapons or undertaken any preparatory steps to prepare for a strike.<sup>[10]</sup>

**Kremlin-run television shows still air the occasional nuclear threat, which are common in Russia’s jingoistic domestic information space.** For example, Russia’s State Duma Committee Chairman on Defense, Andrey Kartapolov, briefly discussed nuclear threats on Russian state TV on November 5 despite the general softening of the Kremlin’s narrative.<sup>[11]</sup> Russian state TV (alongside some populist figures) have previously amplified nuclear threats prior to Russian military failures in the autumn, and their rhetorical flourishes should not be misconstrued as indicators of the Kremlin’s official position. Figures such as the late Russian ultra-nationalist and then leader of the Liberal Democratic Party Vladimir Zhirinovsky made regular and outlandish nuclear threats on Russian state broadcasts for years, even threatening to drop a “little” nuclear bomb on the residence of then-Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in 2018.<sup>[12]</sup> The Russian milblogger community largely did not interact with these nuclear narratives and continued to criticize that Russian military command for its conventional battlefield failures. Russian propagandists will continue to make these threats as a way of reminding domestic audiences of Russia’s might amidst clear military failures on the frontlines.

**The Kremlin likely privately clarified its nuclear policies to deescalate with the United States and its allies.** US and allied officials reported that US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has been in contact with Putin’s foreign policy advisor Yuri Ushakov and Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev

in an effort to reduce the risk of nuclear use.<sup>[13]</sup> The Russian Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Andrey Kelin, also noted on October 26 that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu made several calls to his counterparts, reportedly assuring them that Russia is uninterested in using nuclear weapons in the war.<sup>[14]</sup> China might have also played a role in pressuring the Kremlin to reduce its nuclear threats. Chinese President Xi Jinping stated on November 4 that “the international community should... jointly oppose the use or threats to use nuclear weapons, advocate that nuclear weapons must not be used and nuclear wars must not be fought, in order to prevent a nuclear crisis in Eurasia.”<sup>[15]</sup> Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe likely expressed a similar notion to Shoigu during an October 26 call.<sup>[16]</sup>

**The Kremlin may conduct future rhetorical nuclear brinksmanship in an effort to prompt the United States and its allies to pressure Ukraine to negotiate; the Kremlin will be unable to directly force Kyiv to negotiate through nuclear threats.** ISW continues to assess that Russian nuclear use in Ukraine remains unlikely and that the Kremlin is currently taking steps to deescalate its nuclear rhetoric. The Kremlin’s nuclear threats failed to undermine Ukrainian political and societal will to continue to oppose Russia’s invasion. As ISW wrote on September 30, “Ukraine and its international backers have made clear that they will not accept negotiations at gunpoint and will not renounce Ukraine’s sovereign right to its territories.”<sup>[17]</sup> **The United States and its allies should not undermine Ukraine’s continued dedication to recapturing all Russian-occupied territory and halting Russia’s genocidal invasion.**

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on November 6:

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin confirmed on November 6 that the Wagner Group is creating training and management centers for local “people’s militias” in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts.<sup>[18]</sup>
- Russian milbloggers amplified reports that the Russian 155<sup>th</sup> Naval Infantry Brigade sustained severe losses during the recent offensive push towards Pavlivka, Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[19]</sup>
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the direction of Svatove and Kreminna.<sup>[20]</sup>
- Russian opposition sources reported that Ukrainian shelling near Makiivka, Luhansk Oblast may have killed up to 500 Russian mobilized personnel in one day.<sup>[21]</sup>
- Russian forces continued establishing defensive positions on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[22]</sup> Ukrainian forces continued their interdiction campaign against Russian logistics in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[23]</sup>
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks near Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Vuhledar.<sup>[24]</sup> Russian sources claimed that Russian forces broke through Ukrainian defenses near Bakhmut, made marginal gains south of Avdiivka, and remained impaled near Pavlivka in western Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[25]</sup>
- Ukrainian personnel repaired two external power lines to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) on November 5, resuming the supply of electricity to the ZNPP after shelling deenergized the facility on November 3.<sup>[26]</sup>
- Russian occupation officials continued to cite the threat of a Ukrainian strike on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Station to justify the continued forced relocation of civilians in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[27]</sup>
- Russian occupation officials continued to forcibly transfer Ukrainian children from occupied Ukraine to Russia under the guise of “vacation” schemes.<sup>[28]</sup>
- Russian forces continued to struggle with domestic resistance to and poor provisioning of ongoing mobilization efforts.<sup>[29]</sup>

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 6, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 5 Click here to read the full report.

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, and Mason Clark  
November 5, 6:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin seeks to obfuscate his efforts to strengthen his independent power base with an appeal to the concept of Russia's historic unity.** Prigozhin provided a vague response to a media inquiry regarding his recent visit to Kursk Oblast on Russia's Unity Day (November 4), during which he had indirectly implied that Wagner forces are involved in upholding Russia's unity.<sup>[1]</sup> Prigozhin stated that Russian people, businesses, government, and army need to come together to fight for Russia's sovereignty and its great future while deflecting from the journalist's question regarding Prigozhin's reported meeting with Kursk businessmen about the organization of an unspecified people's militia – outside of formal Russian military command structures. Prigozhin also noted that Russia has all the ingredients to achieve its goals including a strong president, cohesive army, and great nationhood, which he concluded with an out-of-place greeting from Wagner fighters. Prigozhin later claimed in a follow up media response that his "independence" does not contradict Russian President Vladimir Putin's politics as some audiences have interpreted.<sup>[2]</sup>

Prigozhin's rather sarcastic statements have several underlying implications for his perception of his power within Russia. ISW previously reported that Kursk Oblast officials announced the construction of second and third lines of defenses in the region, and if Prigozhin's meeting with local businessmen took place, may indicate that he is attempting to expand his influence in the region.<sup>[3]</sup> Prigozhin's comment on Russia's "cohesive army" next to Putin was likely thinly-veiled sarcasm, given that Prigozhin has repeatedly criticized the Russian Armed Forces on numerous occasions.<sup>[4]</sup> Prigozhin also directly recognized that he is an independent entity, which as ISW previously assessed, relieves him of some obligations to the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).<sup>[5]</sup> Putin's dependency on Prigozhin's forces around Bakhmut also allows Prigozhin privileges such as voicing his criticisms of the Kremlin or the Russian Armed Forces without significant ramifications. Prigozhin has also coincidentally opened his Wagner Center in St. Petersburg on Russia's Unity Day.<sup>[6]</sup> However, Prigozhin is notably shielding his efforts to build an independent power base and shape the conduct of Russia's invasion of Ukraine with language focused on Russian Unity – likely both to appeal to Russian nationalists and civilians and to deflect criticism of his fairly overt efforts to build an independent power base.

**Prigozhin continues to rely on ineffective convicts to staff his forces.** Prigozhin declined to comment on a reporter's question regarding ongoing recruitment drives at Krasnoyarsk Krai penal colonies, despite previously openly discussing prisoner participation in the war with Russian outlets like *RiaFan*.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian opposition outlet *The Insider*, however, found that over 500 prisoners recruited into Wagner units have died in the past two months.<sup>[8]</sup> The publication added that Wagner lost between 800 and 1,000 mercenaries in Ukraine, indicating convicts comprise a large proportion of Wagner's forces in Ukraine. Ukrainian intelligence officials also previously reported that many prisoners suffering from infectious diseases infected Wagner troops, to which Prigozhin responded that he does not discriminate on the basis of illness.<sup>[9]</sup>

**Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian confirmed that Iran sent Russia combat drones.** Amir-Abdollahian stated on November 5 that Iran "gave a limited number of drones to Russia months before" the war in Ukraine.<sup>[10]</sup> Amir-Abdollahian also claimed that if Ukrainian officials could prove that the Russian military has used Iranian-made drones in Ukraine then Iranian officials would "not be indifferent" to the concern - falsely and ridiculously implying that Russia has not used the drones that he admitted Iran has provided.<sup>[11]</sup> Iran's confirmation of the drone shipments further supports ISW's previous assessments that Russia is sourcing Iranian-made weapons systems to address the depletion of its high-precision munitions arsenal.<sup>[12]</sup> ISW previously assessed that Iran is likely already exploiting Russian reliance on these Iranian-made weapons systems to request Russian assistance with its nuclear program.<sup>[13]</sup> The nuclear assistance requests and the recognition of the drone shipments are both indicators that Iranian officials may intend to more clearly establish an explicit bilateral security relationship with Russia in which they are more equal partners.

**Former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Security Minister and current DNR military commander Aleksandr Khodakovsky claimed on November 5 that Russian friendly fire may have caused up to 60% of total Russian losses since the end of Russian offensive operations in Mariupol in mid-May.**<sup>[14]</sup> Even if this statistic is exaggerated, the fact that a Russian commander is publicly speculating on such a damning indicator of Russian and proxy competency indicates the deep challenges Russian forces face. Friendly fire typically does account for a limited number of losses in war but ordinarily nowhere near 60% of total casualties, which demonstrates a lack of communication and command and

control coordination between Russian forces. Russian and Ukrainian sources also reported that a Russian rotation returning to its base near Pavlivka, Donetsk Oblast on November 5 drove into a ditch constructed by army subcontractors without prior discussion or warning, further demonstrating a widespread lack of cross-training and coordination between Russian troops.[15] The frequent replacement of Russian military leaders, promotion of inexperienced soldiers, and cobbled-together Russian force composition including Russian contract soldiers, Russian mobilized soldiers, DNR and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) forces, and Wagner Group forces exacerbate the fragmented nature of the Russian chain of command and ineffectiveness of Russian forces and likely contributes to frequent friendly fire incidents.

#### Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevheniy Prigozhin seeks to obfuscate his efforts to strengthen his independent power base with an appeal to the concept of Russia's historic unity.
  - Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian confirmed that Iran began providing Russia drones before February 24, but strangely denied that Russian forces have used them in combat.
  - DNR military commander Aleksandr Khodakovskiy claimed that Russian friendly fire may have caused up to 60% of total Russian losses since mid-May.
  - Ukrainian troops reportedly continued counteroffensives along the Svatove-Kremenna line.
  - Russian forces continued to set up defensive positions along the Dnipro River.
  - Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian logistics and transportation in Kherson Oblast.
  - Russian forces continued to attack around Bakhmut and claimed unspecified advances.
  - Russian forces continued unsuccessful offensive operations in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area and in western Donetsk.
  - Continued poor conditions for mobilized soldiers catalyzed a large-scale protest in Kazan.
  - Unknown actors reportedly attempted to assassinate high-profile Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Supreme Court Judge Aleksandr Nikulin.
  - Russia continues to deploy personnel to staff administrative positions in occupied areas.
  - Russian forces continued forced evacuations in Kherson Oblast. Over 80% of Kherson residents reportedly have evacuated.
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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 4

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 4, 9:15 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian military is likely trying to use mobilized personnel to restart the Donetsk offensive but will likely still fail to achieve operationally significant gains. Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces General Valerii Zaluzhnyi reported on November 4 that Russian forces have tripled the intensity of hostilities in certain sections of the front with up to 80 daily assaults.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are currently focusing those offensive operations in the direction of Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and western Donetsk Oblast.[2] The Ukrainian Eastern Group of troops spokesperson Serhiy Cherevatyi stated on November 4 that Russian forces are likely trying to seize Bakhmut and Soledar in Donetsk Oblast so that Russia can declare some type of success by announcing the "liberation" of the Donbas (even though those gains would not give Russia control over the entire region).[3] Cherevatyi also noted the presence of mobilized men in the Bakhmut direction, an area that should not in principle see many mobilized personnel given the extensive presence in this area of Wagner Group and proxy units that should not be receiving large numbers of Russian reservists.[4] ISW previously assessed that Russian forces prematurely impaled an insufficient concentration of mobilized personnel on offensive pushes near Bakhmut and Vuhledar in Donetsk Oblast on November 3.[5] The apparent intensification of Russian assaults in Donetsk Oblast likely indicates that

Russian forces are repeating that mistake throughout this section of the front. The increased quantity of personnel at frontline positions may allow Russian forces to achieve some gains in Donetsk Oblast, but poor training, logistics, and command will continue to prevent Russian forces from making operationally significant gains that would materially affect the course or outcome of the war.

**Russian forces are setting conditions for a controlled withdrawal in northwestern Kherson Oblast, likely to avoid a disorderly rout from the right (west) bank of the Dnipro River.** Russian forces will likely need to engage in a fighting withdrawal to prevent Ukrainian forces from chasing them onto the left (eastern) bank. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command corrected social media reports from November 3 regarding the destruction of civilian boats and piers along the Dnipro River.<sup>[6]</sup> Ukraine's Southern Operational Command stated that Russian forces are purposefully destroying civilian vessels and are restricting civilian use of watercraft and access to the shore. The corrected story likely corresponds with the reports of Russian forces preparing defensive positions on the left bank and the withdrawal of certain elements and suggests that Russian forces are eliminating ways for Ukrainian forces to chase them across the river during or after a withdrawal. Local Ukrainian sources also shared geolocated footage that reportedly showed the aftermath of the recent Russian destruction of a pedestrian bridge over the Inhulets River in Snihurivka (about 60km east of Mykolaiv City), which may also indicate Russian efforts to slow Ukrainian advances amidst a Russian withdrawal.<sup>[7]</sup>

**Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely setting conditions to continue covert mobilization, which suggests that partial mobilization did not generate sufficient forces for Putin's maximalist goals in Ukraine despite Putin's claims to the contrary.** Putin announced on November 4 that Russian forces mobilized 318,000 men of the 300,000 authorized due to the recruitment of volunteers during the mobilization period.<sup>[8]</sup> Putin added that Russia had already committed 49,000 men to combat missions. Putin's claims of a successful and completed mobilization are inconsistent with his November 4 decree that allows Russian officials to mobilize citizens with outstanding convictions for some serious crimes.<sup>[9]</sup> Putin also signed decrees extending the status of servicemen to men serving in volunteer formations and outlining mobilization exemptions for citizens undergoing alternative service.<sup>[10]</sup> Such decrees likely indicate that Putin is preparing to continue covert mobilization in Russia by attempting to incentivize volunteer service or setting conditions to mobilize convicts—given that he has yet to sign an order terminating mobilization as of November 4.<sup>[11]</sup> Provisions authorizing the mobilization of prisoners may also indicate that Putin is trying to preempt social tensions by setting conditions to mobilize convicts instead of civilian Russian men.

Russian opposition and online outlets have reported that Russian authorities and businesses are preparing for a second mobilization wave by modernizing military recruitment centers and preparing lists of eligible men.<sup>[12]</sup> Rostov, Kursk, and Voronezh Oblast governors have also previously spoken about conducting a second wave of mobilization, and a few men reported receiving summonses for 2023.<sup>[13]</sup> While it is unclear if the Kremlin will double down on covert mobilization or initiate another mobilization wave, Putin's decrees are indicative of the persistent force generation challenges that have plagued the Russian military campaign.

**Russia's costly force generation efforts will continue to weigh on the Russian economy and could ignite social tensions if the Kremlin does not fulfill its financial obligations to the participants of the "special military operation."** Putin signed a decree granting a one-time payment of 195,000 rubles (about \$3,150) to mobilized men and individuals who had signed a contract after the declaration of partial mobilization on September 21.<sup>[14]</sup> By committing to pay mobilized men and giving the status of servicemen to volunteers the Kremlin is adding another financial burden to Russia's economy.<sup>[15]</sup> Russian governors are already releasing statements attempting to justify delays in compensating mobilized men and their families citing budget issues and the need to finance supplies for Russian servicemen.<sup>[16]</sup> Failures to make payouts to mobilized men are already causing social tensions in Chuvash Republic, for example, where 1,800 men are demanding that the region immediately pay the promised 400 million rubles (about \$6.5 million) to the mobilized population.<sup>[17]</sup>

**Iran is likely already exploiting Russian reliance on Iranian-made weapons systems to request Russian assistance with its nuclear program.** CNN reported on November 4 that unspecified US intelligence officials believe that Iranian officials have been asking Russia for help in acquiring additional nuclear materials and with nuclear fuel fabrication.<sup>[18]</sup> Nuclear fuel could allow Iran to shorten the breakout period to create a nuclear weapon depending on the kind of fuel and the kind of reactor for

which it is being requested. CNN reported that it was unclear whether Russian officials had agreed to Iranian requests.[19] ISW has previously reported that Iranian plans to send more combat drones and possibly ballistic missile systems to Russia will likely strengthen Russia's growing reliance on Iranian-made weapons systems.[20]

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative Andriy Yusov stated on November 4 that GUR has not received information confirming that Iranian missile systems have arrived in Russia despite intelligence that confirms the contract for the transfer of those systems.[21] Yusov also stated that another shipment of 200 Iranian-made combat drones to Russia is currently underway.[22] Ukrainian Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov reported on November 4 that Russian forces have almost completely used up the first set of 300 combat drones from Iran.[23] Reznikov reported that Russia currently has contracts to receive 1,500 to 2,400 more Iranian-made combat drones, assuming Iran can fill the orders.[24] Russia's growing reliance on these systems allows Iran to exert greater influence on Russian officials, and Iranian officials have already likely started to exploit that influence in support of its nuclear program. The Iranian requests for Russian assistance with its nuclear program may be an indicator of an intensifying Russian Iranian security partnership in which Iran and Russia are more equal partners.

**Russian forces may be deploying extreme measures against deserting personnel in an attempt to respond to severe morale issues.** The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on November 4 that Russian forces in Ukraine probably have started deploying "barrier troops" and "blocking units", units that threaten to shoot their own retreating personnel to compel offensives.[25] The UK MoD reported that Russian generals likely want their subordinate commanders to shoot deserters, including possibly authorizing personnel to shoot to kill their own deserting servicemen.[26] Desertion in the face of the enemy is a capital offense in many militaries, including America's.[27] The deployment of designated units or individuals behind friendly lines to shoot deserters is nevertheless indicative of just how low the morale, discipline, and cohesion of Russian military forces in parts of Ukraine have become.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Russian military is likely trying to use mobilized personnel to restart its Donetsk offensive but will likely fail to achieve operationally significant gains.
- Russian forces are setting conditions for an orderly withdrawal from the west bank of the Dnipro River to avoid a rout in Kherson Oblast.
- President Vladimir Putin is likely setting conditions to continue mobilization covertly despite claims that partial mobilization produced sufficient forces.
- Russia's costly force generation measures will likely continue to weigh on the Russian economy and generate social tensions.
- Iran is likely exploiting Russian reliance on Iranian-made weapon systems to request Russian assistance with its nuclear program.
- Russian forces may be deploying extreme measures against deserting personnel in an attempt to respond to severe morale issues.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kreminna and Svatove.
- Russian forces continued to prepare existing and new defensive lines in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued forced evacuation measures in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian and occupation officials continued to set measures for the forced deportation of Ukrainian children to the Russian Federation.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 3**

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

**Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan**

**November 3, 9:15 pm ET**

**Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.**

**Russian forces are continuing to withdraw some elements from northwestern Kherson Oblast, but it is still unclear if Russian forces will fight for Kherson City.** Kherson City occupation deputy Kirill Stremousov stated on November 3 that Russian forces "will most likely leave for the left (eastern) bank" of the Dnipro River urging civilians to evacuate from Kherson City "as quickly as possible."<sup>[1]</sup> ISW has observed that Russian forces are continuing to prepare fallback positions on the left (eastern) bank of the Dnipro River while continuing to set up defensive positions northwest of Kherson City and transporting additional mobilized forces there, despite Stremousov's statement.<sup>[2]</sup> Some Russian elite units — such as airborne forces and naval infantry — are reportedly continuing to operate on the right (western) bank of the Dnipro River and their full withdrawal from northern Kherson Oblast would be a clearer indicator that Russian forces will not fight for Kherson City or settlements on the right bank.<sup>[3]</sup> Stremousov also hypothesized about the probability of fighting in Kherson City and northern Kherson Oblast in the next two weeks, which may suggest that he anticipates some battles for Kherson City despite his comments about withdrawal.<sup>[4]</sup> Stremousov is also an unreliable source who has consistently issued contradictory statements and made emotional responses to events, and his public statements may be clouded by personal fears of losing his position within the occupation government.

Ukrainian and Russian sources also extensively discussed the reported closure of some Russian checkpoints in the vicinity of Kherson City, the theft of city's monuments, and the removal of a Russian flag from the Kherson Oblast Administration building as indicators of an ongoing Russian withdrawal from the city.<sup>[5]</sup> A Russian outlet claimed that Russian officials removed the flag because the occupation administration moved to Henichesk by the Crimean border.<sup>[6]</sup> While the relocation of the Kherson Oblast occupation government may suggest that Russian forces are preparing to abandon Kherson City, it may equally indicate that they are setting conditions for urban combat within the city. Similar reports may arise in coming days given the ongoing forced evacuation of civilians from both right and left banks of the Dnipro River but may not indicate an immediate withdrawal of Russian forces from Kherson City. The disposition of Russian airborne forces remains the best indicator of Russian intentions.

**Russian forces prematurely impaled an insufficient concentration of mobilized personnel on offensive pushes near Bakhmut and Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast, wasting the fresh supply of mobilized personnel on marginal gains towards operationally insignificant settlements.** Ukrainian General Staff Deputy Chief Oleksiy Hromov stated on November 3 that one or two Russian motorized rifle companies with artillery and tank support conducted ground attacks within the past week to seize Pavlivka in an effort to reach Vuhledar, but that Russian forces have suffered losses due to Ukrainian defenses.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian sources also acknowledged on November 3 that the rate of Russian advances near Vuhledar is slow due to Ukrainian resistance and mud.<sup>[8]</sup> Hromov stated that Russian forces continue ground attacks at the expense of mobilized personnel, private military company forces, and former prisoners, and that the Russians conducted over 40 ground attacks in the Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and western Donetsk Oblast areas in the past 24 hours, sustaining over 300 casualties (100 killed) in just one direction.<sup>[9]</sup> ISW has previously reported on the slow Russian rate of advance in Donetsk Oblast and injudicious allocation of resources on the front lines.<sup>[10]</sup> Russian forces would likely have had more success in such offensive operations if they had waited until enough mobilized personnel had arrived to amass a force large enough to overcome Ukrainian defenses despite poor weather conditions. Russian attacks continuing current patterns are unlikely to generate enough momentum to regain the battlefield initiative. ISW offers no hypothesis to explain Russian forces' impatience or their continued allocation of limited military assets to gaining operationally insignificant ground in Donetsk Oblast rather than defending against the Ukrainian counteroffensives in Luhansk and Kherson oblasts.

**Russian outlets continued to publish confused reports regarding the dismissal and replacement of Colonel General Alexander Lapin from either his role as the commander of the Central Military District (CMD) or as the commander of the Russian "central" forces in Ukraine.** The CMD press service told Kremlin-affiliated outlet *Kommersant* that the head of the organizational and mobilization department of the CMD, Major General Alexander Linkov, will temporarily replace Lapin as the CMD

commander.[11] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has not officially announced Lapin's dismissal or replacement, and the CMD did not specify if Linkov will also take charge of the "central" forces in Ukraine. Unnamed Russian MoD sources had previously told other Kremlin-affiliated outlets that Commander of the 8th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant-General Andrey Mordvichev would command "central" forces while Lapin is on a three-week medical leave.[12] Milbloggers with ties to the Russian state media also recently claimed that Mordvichev will also command the CMD.[13] Such incoherent announcements by Russian MoD officials about the possible replacement of the second most-senior Russian commander in Ukraine is highly unusual for a professional military during a critical period of a war.

**Russian authorities may be setting conditions to imminently transfer the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) to the Russian power grid following the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) November 3 statements affirming that Ukrainian authorities are not misusing nuclear materials.[14]** The IAEA also stated on November 3 that shelling damaged external powerlines to the ZNPP in Ukrainian-held territory at points 50-60km away from the plant, completely cutting power to the ZNPP just one day after Ukrainian authorities transferred two reactors to a hot shutdown mode to generate heat for Enerhodar.[15] This timing suggests that Russian authorities seek to force the transfer of the ZNPP to the Russian power grid by painting Russian control as the only viable option to provide electricity to the ZNPP and heat to Enerhodar and the surrounding area. The IAEA stated that backup generators are powering the ZNPP and have enough fuel for 15 days; Russian occupation authorities may transfer the ZNPP to the Russian power grid within this 15-day timeline.[16] Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev claimed on November 3 that Russian authorities prevented a Ukrainian "terrorist attack" at the ZNPP, further suggesting that Russian authorities intend to paint themselves as the only safe operator of the ZNPP contrary to the IAEA's findings of no indications of undeclared Ukrainian nuclear activities.[17]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- It is still unclear whether Russian forces will defend Kherson City despite the ongoing withdrawal of some Russian elements from northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces prematurely deployed newly mobilized personnel to offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast in the pursuit of minimal and operationally insignificant territorial gains.
- Russian outlets continued to publish contradictory and confusing reports about the dismissal of Colonel General Alexander Lapin from the position of CMD commander or commander of the Russian "central" forces.
- Russian authorities may be setting conditions to imminently transfer the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant to the Russian power grid.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kreminna and Svatove.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.
- The Russian military continues to face pronounced issues in the supply of critical military equipment.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense is likely continuing mobilization efforts covertly.
- Russian occupation officials continued forced evacuations in Kherson Oblast.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 3, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 2 Click here to read the full report.

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 2, 8:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian force generation efforts combined with Western sanctions are having long-term damaging effects on the Russian economy, as ISW has previously forecasted.** Financial experts told Reuters that the Kremlin will face a budget deficit that will “drain Moscow’s reserves to their lowest level in years” due to projected decreases in energy revenue, sanctions, and the cost of Russian mobilization.[1] One expert predicted that payouts to mobilized men including social benefits may cost the Kremlin between 900 billion rubles and three trillion rubles (around \$14.6-\$32.4 billion) in the next six months. The number does not account for payouts to other categories of servicemen within the Russian forces such as BARS (Combat Army Reserve), volunteer battalions, and the long-term commitment to veterans’ payments to contract servicemen, volunteers, non-military specialists who moved to occupied territories, and proxy fighters.[2] ISW previously estimated that one volunteer battalion of 400 servicemen costs Russia at least \$1.2 million per month excluding enlistment bonuses and special payments for military achievements.[3]

**The Kremlin is continuing to rely heavily on financially incentivizing Russians to fight in Ukraine, which will likely continue to strain the Russian economy for decades.** Russian officials have been promising salaries to volunteers and mobilized men that are more than twice the average Russian civilian salary before and during Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[4] The Kremlin has been attempting to deflect part of the cost of the force generation effort onto Russian federal subjects but will likely need to tap into the federal budget more heavily soon. United Russia Party Secretary Andrey Turchak, for example, stated that Russian servicemen from all regions must receive uniform benefits and noted that the federal government must cover the difference if the federal subject is unable to fully compensate all participants of the “special military operation.”[5] Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin even acknowledged that there are insufficient measures in place to support mobilized personnel and their families in occupied Donetsk Oblast during a United Russia meeting.[6]

**The Kremlin is already facing challenges in delivering promised compensation, challenges that are increasing social tensions within Russian society.** Russian Telegram channels released footage of mobilized men in Ulyanovsk protesting payment issues.[7] Other footage from the Chuvashia Republic shows a presumably Russian local official yelling at protesting mobilized men that she had not promised them a payment of 300,000 rubles (about \$4,860).[8] Families of mobilized men publicly complained to Voronezh Oblast Governor Alexander Guseyev that they have not received promised compensation of 120,000 rubles (about \$1,945).[9] The Kremlin will need to continue to pay what it has promised to maintain societal control and some resemblance of morale among Russia’s ad hoc collection of forces. ISW has also reported that the Kremlin is igniting conflict within Russian military formations amalgamated from different sources by offering different payments, benefits, and treatment.[10] Social media footage from October 31, for example, showed a physical fight between contract servicemen and mobilized men reportedly over personal belongings and military equipment.[11]

**Russian President Vladimir Putin’s calls for a competitive Russian military industry are divorced from the reality of Russian supply chain and defense industrial base issues.** Putin stressed on November 2 during a meeting of the Coordinating Council for the Russian Armed Forces that it is important that the Russian government ensures active competition between Russian military arms manufacturers.[12] Putin’s calls contrast with recent reporting that Russia has purchased weapons systems from Iran and North Korea to support its war effort in Ukraine.[13] US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby announced on November 2 that the American intelligence community believes that North Korea is covertly supplying Russia with artillery shells.[14] ISW previously reported that Iranian shipments of drones and possible ballistic missiles to Russia will likely further increase Russian reliance on Iranian-made weapons systems.[15] Russia has likely negotiated the weapon shipments with Iran and North Korea because it has significantly depleted its stock of munitions in air, missile, and artillery strikes over the course of the war in Ukraine and cannot readily restock them. Russia’s reliance on isolated and heavily sanctioned states for critical weapons systems does not support Putin’s demand that the Russian military industry becomes highly competitive and meet the needs of the Russian Armed Forces in any short period of time.

**Russian officials announced that occupation authorities began integrating the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) into the jurisdiction of Russian nuclear power plant operator Rosenergoatom on November 2.**[16] Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko claimed that ZNPP personnel who are “critical for the work of the ZNPP” signed contracts with Rosenergoatom and that Russian authorities are exploring the creation of a security zone around the ZNPP.[17] Ukraine’s Energoatom stated on October 28 that only 100 of the 6,700 Ukrainian personnel remaining at the ZNPP

plant have signed new contracts with Russian energy agency Rosatom (out of 11,000 personnel before February 24).[18] The Ukrainian State Inspectorate of Nuclear Regulation stated that Russian forces built an unknown structure at one of seven spent nuclear fuel storage sites at the ZNPP in violation of nuclear safety standards.[19] **As of this publication, the IAEA has not issued a statement condemning the formally announced illegal Russian takeover of the operation of the ZNPP or addressed the likelihood that Russia will demand formal IAEA recognition of Russian control over the ZNPP and thereby de facto recognition of the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory.** Russian and Belarusian officials continue to highlight bilateral defense cooperation between Russia and Belarus as a means of perpetuating the long-standing information operation that Belarus will enter the war in Ukraine on behalf of Russia. Belarus' entry into the war remains highly unlikely, as ISW has previously assessed. Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin announced on November 2 that Russia and Belarus held the annual meeting of the Joint Board of the Ministries of Defense with the purpose of strengthening the "joint military potential" of the Russia-Belarus Union State to counter "challenges and threats of a military nature" posed by NATO.[20] Khrenin's statement is likely meant to signal continued Belarusian loyalty to Russia and present an image of Belarusian-Russian military unity to the West. As ISW has previously assessed, the likelihood of a Belarusian invasion of the war remains highly unlikely due to the array of domestic ramifications such an action would have on President Alexander Lukashenko's regime, as well as limited Belarusian military capabilities.[21] The meeting of the Joint Board of the Ministries of Defense is therefore a continuation of a concerted effort on the part of both Belarus and Russia to perpetuate an information operation that presents the threat of the Union State as imminent in order to pin Ukrainian troops against the northern border and pollute the information space.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian force generation efforts combined with Western sanctions are having long-term damaging effects on the Russian economy, as ISW has previously forecasted.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's calls for a competitive Russian military industry are divorced from the reality of Russian supply chain and defense industrial base issues.
- Russian officials announced that occupation authorities began integrating the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) into Russian jurisdiction.
- Russian and Belarusian officials continue to perpetuate the long-standing information operation that Belarus will enter the war in Ukraine on behalf of Russia, but Belarus' entry into the war remains highly unlikely, as ISW has previously assessed.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations in the directions of Svatove and Kremenna, and Russian forces conducted offensive operations to constrain Ukrainian forces.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations along the Dnipro River while Ukrainian forces continued their interdiction campaign.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground assaults near Bakhmut and Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued mobilization efforts and advertising for volunteer battalions while struggling with low morale.
- Russian occupation authorities continued to forcibly relocate Kherson Oblast residents, nationalize Ukrainian enterprises in occupied territory, and forcibly deport Ukrainian children to Russia.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, November 1

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Madison Williams, Yekaterina Klepanchuk, and Frederick W. Kagan

November 1, 8:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Iran plans to send more combat drones and new ballistic missile systems to Russia for use in Ukraine, likely further strengthening Russia's reliance on Iranian-made weapon systems.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on November 1 that Iranian officials intend to send a shipment of more than 200 Shahed-136, Mohajer-6, and Arash-2 combat drones to Russia.[1] The GUR reported that Iran will send Russia the drones in a disassembled state and that Russian personnel will assemble them with Russian markings.[2] CNN reported on November 1 that unnamed officials from a western country that closely monitors Iranian weapons programs stated that Iran plans to send a thousand weapons to Russia by the end of the year, including surface-to-surface short-range ballistic missiles and combat drones.[3] This would be the first confirmed instance of Iran sending Russia advanced precision-guided missiles. Russia likely negotiated the additional Iranian shipment of weapons systems due to the depletion of its stockpile of cruise missile and drone systems over the course of the war in Ukraine, particularly during the Russian campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure. The GUR reported that Ukrainian air defenses have shot down more than 300 Shahed-136 drones since Russia starting using them in Ukraine on September 13.[4] Russia will likely continue to use drone attacks and missile strikes against critical infrastructure to try to offset the failures and limitations of its conventional forces on the frontline. Russian dependence on Iranian-made systems, and therefore on Iran, will likely increase.

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) started its semi-annual fall conscription drive on November 1, amidst reports of continuing covert mobilization throughout the country.** Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that 2,700 draft committees across 85 federal subjects began the fall conscription call-up of 120,000 men.[5] Shoigu also stated that partial mobilization in Russia concluded. Head of the Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the Russian General Staff, Yevgeniy Burdinsky, reiterated that Russia is conscripting 7,500 fewer men than in previous years and noted that partial mobilization postponed the conscription cycle by one month.[6] Burdinsky claimed that conscripts will not serve in occupied Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, or Zaporizhia oblasts this year and will not participate in combat. Head of the 4th Directorate of the Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the Russian General Staff Vladimir Tsimlyansky added that most recruits will deploy to training formations and military units where they will train for five months, while others will receive specializations based on their skills and education level.[7] The Russian MoD has conducted semi-annual conscription call-ups for decades and should be able to execute this process effectively and efficiently. Any problems with the execution of the fall call-up would likely indicate that partial mobilization and the war in Ukraine have complicated a standard procedure.

Numerous Russian sources reported that Russian enlistment officers are continuing to mobilize men despite Shoigu's previous announcements of the conclusion of partial mobilization and transition into the conscription period on October 28. Local Russian outlets reported instances of men receiving mobilization notices in Tyumen and St. Petersburg as of October 31.[8] The Russian Central Military District (CMD) reportedly told journalists of a Russian outlet that mobilization processes will continue across Russia until Russian President Vladimir Putin signs a decree ending the mobilization period.[9] Ukrainian Melitopol and Mariupol authorities also reported that Russian occupation authorities are continuing to coerce Ukrainians into volunteer battalions and territorial defense units.[10]

**Commander of the 8th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District (SMD) Lieutenant-General Andrey Mordvichev reportedly replaced Colonel-General Alexander Lapin as commander of the Central Military District (CMD).** Several Russian milbloggers—including some who appear on Russian state television—noted that Mordichev has replaced Lapin in this position, but the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has not officially announced Mordichev's appointment nor Lapin's dismissal as of November 1.[11] A Russian local outlet citing an unnamed official within the Russian MoD claimed that Mordichev will only replace Lapin as the commander of the "center" forces in Ukraine for the duration of Lapin's supposed three-week medical leave.[12] A milblogger who frequently appears on Russian state media claimed that the Commander of the Russian Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovkin, personally appointed Mordichev to replace Lapin due to his commitment to objective frontline reporting.[13] If reports of Mordichev's appointment are true, then the Kremlin may be attempting to appease the pro-war milblogger community that has been demanding transparency and more honest reporting. The milblogger added that Mordichev reportedly has "warm working relations" with Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, and that Kadyrov called Mordichev "the best commander" during their meeting

in mid-March.[14] Mordichev's appointment may therefore indicate that the Kremlin is attempting to appease the *siloviki* faction—composed of Kadyrov and Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin—that has publicly criticized Lapin as well.[15] Lapin's dismissal may have also been Surovikin's recommendation as well, however, given that both commanders operated in the Luhansk Oblast area to seize Lysychansk and its surroundings in June.[16] ISW cannot independently verify milblogger or Russian local outlet reports at this time.

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin is likely attempting to address critiques against his parallel military structures following Lapin's reported dismissal.** Prigozhin defended his mercenaries against unspecified “tens of thousands of critics,” stating that his Wagner mercenaries are dying while critics are refusing to go to the frontlines.[17] Prigozhin has been responding to numerous inquiries in recent days regarding Wagner units suffering losses or facing outbreaks of infectious diseases among prisoner recruits, but his attacks against Lapin have prompted some within the pro-war community to publicly question his authority.[18] Many Russian milbloggers who had defended Lapin heavily criticized Prigozhin’s comments about the Russian higher military command, with one milblogger stating that “shepherds and cooks,” sarcastically referring to Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Prigozhin, could not assess Lapin’s performance.[19] ISW has also previously noted that Prigozhin’s units have not made significant gains around Bakhmut since June.[20]

Prigozhin is likely attempting to reduce the appearance that he might become too powerful, stating that he has no plans to hold political office and would refuse such a position if offered.[21] Prigozhin also added that he does not consider himself to be a leader of public opinion and does not engage in “showdowns” with Russian officials, despite continuing to publicly attack St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov and repeatedly calling for his resignation.[22] Prigozhin added that he is not competing with Beglov in the St-Petersburg business sphere.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Planned Iranian shipments of drones and ballistic missiles to Russia will likely further strengthen Russian reliance on Iran and Iranian-made weapons systems.
- The Russian MoD started its semi-annual fall conscription cycle despite reports of Russian authorities covertly continuing mobilization measures.
- Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District (SMD), Lieutenant-General Andrey Mordvichev, reportedly replaced Colonel-General Alexander Lapin as commander of the Central Military District (CMD).
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin is likely attempting to address critiques against his parallel military structures following Lapin's reported dismissal.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations in the directions of Svatove and Kremenna.
- Russian forces continued defensive preparations while Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations around Bakhmut and around Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued to strengthen Russian control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian military structures are reportedly expanding training capabilities.
- Russian occupation officials continued to set conditions for the long-term and permanent relocation of residents from the east bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.

### **Interactive Map and Assessment: Verified Ukrainian Partisan Attacks against Russian Occupation Forces**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Date: November 1, 2022

George Barros and Noel Mikkelsen

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of verified Ukrainian Partisan Attacks. ISW will update this map as we confirm more attacks.

**Key Takeaway:** Effective Ukrainian partisan attacks are forcing the Kremlin to divert resources away from frontline operations to help secure rear areas, degrading Russia's ability to defend against ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives, let alone conduct their own offensive operations. Poor Russian operational security has enabled Ukrainian partisan attacks. Russia's increasing manpower shortages are likely degrading Russian forces' ability to effectively secure Russian rear areas against partisan attacks and simultaneously defend against Ukrainian counteroffensives. The Kremlin still has not effectively countered Ukraine's organized partisan movement and is unlikely to have the capabilities to do so.

*Note on methodology: This curated list of confirmed Ukrainian partisan attacks contains only events that ISW can verify with high confidence using visual evidence, remotely sensed data, or Russian and Ukrainian source corroboration. This list only includes events that official Ukrainian government entities have claimed or discussed. ISW has observed several reported partisan attacks that have not met this high-confidence threshold. This dataset is likely a small subset of all actual Ukrainian partisan attacks. This list does not include Ukrainian partisan reconnaissance or fire adjustment tasks. This list does not jeopardize Ukrainian operational security as Russian and Ukrainian government sources have discussed them publicly.*

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 31

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 31, 9:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces conducted another massive wave of missiles strikes targeting critical Ukrainian infrastructure across the country on October 31, likely in an attempt to degrade Ukraine's will to fight as temperatures drop. Russian forces fired over 50 Kh-101 and Kh-555 missiles from the northern Caspian Sea and the Volgodonsk region of Rostov Oblast, targeting critical Ukrainian energy infrastructure.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 44 out of over 50 Russian missiles.[2] Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal reported that the strikes damaged 18 mostly energy-related targets across 10 Ukrainian regions.[3] Ukrainian officials reported that Russian strikes cut off water to 80% of Kyiv residents on October 31 and left hundreds of thousands without power.[4]

Russian occupation officials once again shifted their rhetoric regarding the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) and are likely setting information conditions to continue to drive evacuations from the west bank of the Dnipro River and provide rhetorical cover for a Russian withdrawal from the area. Kherson Occupation Head Vladimir Saldo announced on October 31 that his administration is expanding the evacuation zone by 15km from the Dnipro River and cited information that Ukraine is preparing for a "massive missile attack" of the Kakhovka HPP dam, which Saldo alleged will cause massive flooding and destruction of civilian infrastructure.[5] Saldo previously claimed on October 26 that it would be "practically impossible" to destroy the dam and that even in case of a breach, the water level of the Dnipro River would only rise 2 meters.[6]

The apparent oscillation in Saldo's position on the Kakhovka HPP indicates that his administration is likely using threats of breach and flooding to perpetuate an information operation with a two-fold purpose: to drive evacuations from the west bank and to explain away a future Russian withdrawal from the west bank. There is no scenario in which it would be advantageous for Ukraine to blow the dam. The ramifications that such an action would have on the safety of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), which relies on the water in the Kakhovka reservoir for coolant, and the economic and social implications of flooding over 80 settlements and destroying civilian homes and viable land, entirely preclude the possibility that this is a contingency Ukraine may pursue. Blowing the dam would also make it much harder for Ukrainian forces to achieve their stated aims of liberating the remainder of Kherson Oblast and other territories east of the river. Saldo's statements are likely therefore meant to encourage

residents of the west bank to promptly evacuate and may also establish informational cover for a Russian withdrawal from the west bank. Saldo could be framing the dam explosion as an inevitable and insurmountable obstacle that Russian forces could only avoid by abandoning the west bank and retreating further into Kherson Oblast. Russia's ability or willingness to physically damage the dam is relatively immaterial—the informational effects of accusing Ukraine of preparing to blow the dam could be sufficient to create rhetorical cover to explain away any future Russian withdrawals.

**Russian forces are likely continuing to move troops and military assets across the Dnipro River in anticipation of Ukrainian advances towards Kherson City.** Ukrainian military sources reported on October 30 that Russian forces are preparing to move artillery units and weapons from the west bank of the Dnipro River for possible redeployment in other directions.[7] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command additionally noted on October 31 that Russian forces are preparing to evacuate individual units and military equipment from the west bank and have collected watercraft to facilitate the evacuation.[8] Russian-backed Kherson occupation deputy Kirill Stremousov stated that on October 30 Russian forces also began engineering positions in Bilozerka (6km due west of Kherson City) and Chornobaivka (1km north of Kherson City), which is corroborated by imagery posted by reported Russian collaborators of barbed wire defenses in these areas.[9] The fact that Russian collaborators are preparing to defend Chornobaivka is particularly noteworthy, as Chornobaivka is the last settlement along the M14 north of Kherson City. The current frontline lies less than 20km northwest of Chornobaivka, and active efforts to bolster defense here indicate concern for an imminent Ukrainian advance. The simultaneous evacuation of military assets from the west bank and preparations for the defense of critical areas around Kherson City indicate serious anxiety over Russian control of the west bank.

**Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continued his efforts to increase his status among Russian elites and his presence in St. Petersburg by attacking local officials and announcing the creation of a PMC Wagner Center in St. Petersburg on October 31.** Prigozhin reportedly requested on October 31 that the Russian Prosecutor General's office open a criminal investigation into the "fact" that St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov organized a "criminal community" in St. Petersburg.[10] Prigozhin alleged that Beglov's criminal network intends to plunder the state budget and enrich corrupt officials. Prigozhin is likely using his criticism of Beglov and other St. Petersburg politicians to enhance his own reputation—and his campaign may be working. The publication *Petersburg Vestnik* characterized Prigozhin's popularity as "skyrocketing" on October 31 and asked if he had any plans to form a party or go into politics, to which Prigozhin replied "I do not strive for popularity. My task is to fulfill my duty to the Motherland, and today I do not plan to create any parties, let alone go into politics."[11] Prigozhin may or may not create his own political party, but he is establishing himself as a political force, using his popular status and his affiliation with Wagner to critique his opponents within elite circles and to institutionalize his own authority. Prigozhin criticized Russian "oligarchs" and "elites" on October 31 for living in a "state of comfort" and preventing the full mobilization of Russian society: "until [elites'] children go to war, the full mobilization of the country will not happen." [12] Prigozhin also announced the creation of a "PMC Wagner Center" in St. Petersburg on October 31, which he said is scheduled to open on November 4.[13] Prigozhin described the center as "a complex of buildings in which there are places for free accommodation of inventors, designers, IT specialists, experimental production, and start-up spaces" with the intention of creating a "comfortable environment for generating new ideas in order to increase the defense capability of Russia, including information." Prigozhin noted that he did not inform the local St. Petersburg administration of the center's creation because the local government is not a "sufficiently representative structure to interfere with the work of the PMC Wagner Center." Prigozhin challenged local government officials who have problems with his center to take them up in court and suggested that he will establish new branches if the St. Petersburg branch is successful. Private military companies like Wagner are illegal per the Russian constitution.[14]

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces launched another massive wave of strikes against critical Ukrainian infrastructure, further damaging the power grid and leaving much of Kyiv without water.**
- **Russian officials again changed their minds about the risk of Ukrainian forces destroying the Kakhovka dam, ordering evacuations of areas that could be flooded. There is no scenario in which Ukraine would benefit from destroying the dam, and this rhetoric is likely meant to**

speed evacuations and provide informational cover for Russian withdrawals from the west bank.

- Russian forces are continuing to withdraw from the west bank of the Dnipro River even as they set conditions to fight for positions around Kherson City.
- Wagner Private Military Company financier Evgeniy Prigozhin sought to bring charges against the St. Petersburg mayor for corruption and announced the imminent opening of the PMC Wagner Center in St. Petersburg. Prigozhin also attacked “oligarchs” and “elites” for living in comfort and preventing the full mobilization of Russia.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian troops conducted counter-offensive operations in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast and along the Svatove-Kreminna line on October 30 and 31.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations and Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces continued counter-offensive operations in Kherson Oblast on October 30 and 31.
- The Ukrainian interdiction campaign is reportedly damaging Russian forces exfiltrating across the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut on October 30 and 31.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian troops made incremental gains in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area on October 30 and 31, but ISW cannot verify these claims.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is likely attempting to prevent draft dodging by trying to deceive the Russian population into believing that autumn conscripts will not be sent to fight in Ukraine.
- The MoD also announced the end of partial mobilization on October 31, executing Russian President Vladimir Putin’s order to end mobilization by the end of October
- Local Russian governments remain responsible for even basic provisions to mobilized personnel, demonstrating the inefficiency of crowdfunding efforts and uncoordinated supply lines to support a modern military.
- Russian occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast announced that they would allow the use of Ukrainian hryvnias alongside Russian rubles, demonstrating the failure of their monthslong rubleization efforts in Kherson.
- Russian officials continue to create poor conditions in occupied parts of Kherson Oblast, likely to drive local inhabitants to evacuate.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 31, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## RUSSIAN OFFENSIVE CAMPAIGN ASSESSMENT, OCTOBER 30

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Frederick W. Kagan

October 30, 5:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, October 30. This report forecasts that Russia will continue to conduct conventional military operations well into 2023 rather than escalating to the use of tactical nuclear weapons or scaling back its objectives in pursuit of some off-ramp. It considers the timelines of Russian force generation and deployment, of weather effects, and of Moscow's efforts to freeze Europe into surrender. It includes a summary of battlefield activities that will be described in more detail in tomorrow's update.**

**Russian President Vladimir Putin will most likely try to continue conventional military operations in Ukraine to hold currently occupied territories, gain new ground, and set conditions for the collapse of Western support for Ukraine that he likely expects to occur this winter.** Putin has likely not abandoned hopes of achieving his maximalist aims in Ukraine through conventional military means, which he is pursuing in parallel with efforts to break Ukraine's will to fight and the West's will to continue supporting Kyiv.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin is unlikely to escalate to the use of tactical nuclear weapons barring the sudden collapse of the Russian military permitting Ukrainian forces to make uncontrolled advances throughout the theater.<sup>[2]</sup> Such a situation is possible but unlikely. Putin is extraordinarily unlikely to seek direct military conflict with NATO. Putin is very likely to continue to hint at the possibility of Russian tactical nuclear use and attacks on NATO, however, as parts of his effort to break Western will to continue supporting Ukraine.

**This forecast rests on two assessments. First, that Putin is setting conditions to continue throwing poorly prepared Russian troops directly into the fighting in Ukraine for the foreseeable future rather than pausing operations to reconstitute effective military forces. Second, that Putin's theory of victory relies on using the harsh winter to break Europe's will.** These assessments offer a series of timelines that support the forecast.

**Russian force-generation efforts will occur over the course of several predictable time**

**periods.** Putin has declared that the "partial mobilization" of reservists is complete.<sup>[3]</sup> That declaration means that, in principle, the Russian military will stop calling up reservists and instead focus on completing their brief training periods before sending them to fight in Ukraine. ISW previously assessed that most of the remaining called-up reservists will arrive in the theater of war over the next few weeks.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that continued reserve mobilization efforts will take the form of renewed efforts to recruit "volunteers," likely into volunteer battalions—efforts that were largely shelved during the "partial mobilization."<sup>[5]</sup> Russia will likely struggle to fill out new "volunteer" units rapidly following the reserve call-ups and the flight of hundreds of thousands of Russians who feared those call-ups. Continued attempts to create "volunteer" units will thus likely generate little meaningful combat power and will be spread over an extended period of time.

The Russian military will begin its semi-annual conscription call-up a month later than usual on November 1, 2022. Russia's conscription cycle offers a set of predictable timelines. Normal Russian conscript training involves a period of roughly six months of individual basic and advanced training followed by the assignment of conscripts to combat units in which they complete their remaining six months of mandatory service.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian law bans sending conscripts to combat operations abroad with fewer than four months of training, although it specifies that conditions of war or martial law allow the Russian military to deploy conscripts to fight earlier than that. Putin has declared martial law states of varying degrees of urgency throughout the Russian Federation and could use that declaration to trigger the exemption from the mandatory training period.<sup>[7]</sup> The annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts offers another possible basis for exemption, because Russian law does not preclude the use of conscripts in Russian territory regardless of how much training they have received.<sup>[8]</sup>

Raw conscripts with no military experience and fewer than four months of training are likely to be nearly useless on the battlefield in any case. Putin may rush limited numbers of such conscripts to combat before their four-month training period is complete, but most will likely be held back until March 2023 at the earliest.

The Russian military will likely find it necessary to send these conscripts to units in Ukraine at the end of their six-month period of initial training in any case, however, as there are unlikely to be enough functional combat units at home stations in Russia to receive them. The Russian military has fully committed its available ground forces units to Ukraine in a series of force-generation efforts, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[9]</sup> The partial mobilization and volunteer battalion recruitment efforts are further evidence that the Russian military has no remaining uncommitted ground forces to send. The Russian military likely will

be unable to keep called-up conscripts in training areas for more than six months, however, because the next semi-annual conscription call-up would normally begin around April 1, 2023. Conscripts called up beginning on November 1, 2022, will thus likely be assigned to combat and support units in Ukraine and begin to arrive on the battlefield around May 2023.

The Russian Defense Ministry will not likely be able to conduct additional reserve call-ups as long as it is engaged in providing conscripts with initial training. The next window for a large-scale reserve mobilization would thus likely be not earlier than March 1.

The combination of the just-completed partial reserve mobilization and the annual conscription cycle thus creates two likely waves of Russian troops flowing into Ukraine—one moving in over the next few weeks, and the other starting to flow in spring 2023.

**Weather offers another likely periodization of Russian efforts that coincides well with the force-generation timelines discussed above.** Fall in Ukraine is generally wet and muddy but not usually so bad as to make mechanized offensives impossible. Winter, on the other hand, is usually the best season for mechanized warfare in Ukraine. Ukrainian land is among the most fertile on earth in part because of the dense network of rivers and streams that irrigate it. That network also breaks up the land and can inhibit mechanized advances by canalizing them along roads (although both Russian and Ukrainian troops are, in principle, trained and equipped to operate on this terrain in any season, Ukrainian troops have been far more successful, in general, in doing so.) When the ground freezes hard, however, most of the streams and some of the rivers also freeze, greatly facilitating cross-country mechanized advances. Spring is the nightmare season for fighting in Ukraine. The thaw swells rivers and streams and turns fields into seas of mud. Mechanized warfare in the spring muddy season is extremely difficult (although, again, not impossible for forces like Ukraine's and, theoretically, Russia's, that are properly equipped and trained for it).

The Russian partial mobilization is thus flowing forces into Ukraine now in a way that is likely meant to stiffen Russian defenses and allow Russian forces to hold their positions against expected Ukrainian counter-offensive operations through the rest of the fall and into the dangerous winter period. If Putin intends to deploy Russian boys about to be conscripted after four or six months of training, he could be setting conditions for Russian forces to resume offensive operations after the end of the spring thaw.

**The Russian partial mobilization of reservists just completed strongly suggests that Putin intends to keep fighting into 2023 rather than expecting to secure some sort of ceasefire or to escalate in a way that could end the war on his terms.** He has paid a very high domestic price for this mobilization effort in the flight of hundreds of thousands of Russians to other countries, unprecedented protests, and equally unprecedented criticisms of the performance of the Russian military and the Russian government.<sup>[10]</sup> This price makes sense if Putin intends to keep fighting and recognizes the need to get reinforcements to Ukraine right now in order to hold his positions long enough for fresh conscripts to arrive and turn the tide in his favor, as he might think. It makes far less sense if he intends to escalate to the use of tactical nuclear weapons either in an effort to win the war or in hopes of securing a ceasefire or some other off-ramp on favorable terms. It could make sense as part of a non-escalatory effort to pursue negotiations for some off-ramp had Putin not accompanied his announcement of the end of partial mobilization with repetitions of his maximalist claims regarding the illegitimacy of the Ukrainian state and the artificiality of the Ukrainian ethnos that are incompatible with serious negotiations.

**Putin's efforts to break Europe's will by withholding Russian energy supplies over the winter offers yet another timeline that coheres well with the others.** The theory underlying this Russian effort would be that freezing European populations will put such pressure on their governments that European states will begin to accept Putin's demands to stop providing weapons and other forms of support to Ukraine, at least, and possibly to lift various sanctions on Russia as well. This theory will not really be falsifiable until well into 2023, however. European governments have ostentatiously prepared their populations for a difficult winter, stocked up as best they can on energy supplies, and set conditions to reduce energy usage even at significant economic cost. These actions signal that European leaders are ready for the kinds of pressures they are likely to encounter early in the cold season. Putin can hope that they will not be able to withstand those pressures all through the winter, but the validity of that hope will

not be clear until the coldest weather has had a chance to build them. This timeline thus also coincides with the likely availability of the next wave of Russian forces in spring 2023—Putin will have been able to observe the effect of winter on European will and choose whether to commit his conscripts or pursue some other course of action.

**These timelines are likely more significant in shaping Putin's thoughts and decisions than in shaping effects on the ground.** Roughly one-third of the mobilized reservists have already arrived in Ukraine, according to Putin, and they have made relatively little difference on the battlefield.<sup>[11]</sup> The UK Ministry of Defense noted that they are reinforcing combat units that were in some cases effectively destroyed—reduced to 10 percent of their normal complements.<sup>[12]</sup> The arrival of hastily mobilized and untrained reservists into such units will not render them combat effective. The deployment of raw conscripts after four or six months of training in 2023 will likely have similarly nugatory effects on the battlefield. But Putin does not appear to recognize these facts and seems rather to expect the reserves called up at such surprising cost to make a real difference.

**Putin is thus setting conditions to continue waging conventional war for the foreseeable future rather than preparing to try to end the war by escalation or by making for some “off-ramp.”** He could always change his mind, to be sure. But Ukraine and the West should be operating on the assumption that Ukraine will continue to have many months in which to regain control of strategically vital terrain, for which it will also continue to require continued large-scale Western support.

**On the battlefield, Ukrainian forces conducted further offensive operations in northeastern Ukraine, and Russian forces continued to set conditions for a withdrawal from Kherson. Those developments are summarized briefly and will be covered in more detail tomorrow.**

**Key inflections in ongoing military operations on October 30:**

- Unconfirmed Russian reports claimed that Russian Lieutenant General Andrey Mordvichev (Commander of the 8th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District) replaced Colonel General Alexander Lapin as Central Military District (CMD) commander as of October 30.<sup>[13]</sup> Russian sources continue to make contradictory reports about whether Lapin was fully relieved of command of the CMD or just relieved of command of the Russian operational “Central Group of Forces” operating in Ukraine.<sup>[14]</sup>
- The Russian Ministry of Defense and Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian assaults on Pershotravneve, Tabaivka, and Berestove in Kharkiv Oblast.<sup>[15]</sup>
- Ukrainian sources and geolocated reports indicate that Russian forces destroyed a bridge over the Krasna River in Krasnorichenske, Luhansk Oblast.<sup>[16]</sup> Russian milbloggers accused Ukrainian forces of destroying the bridge.<sup>[17]</sup>
- A Russian occupation official stated that Russian force are preparing to defend Kherson City by engineering defenses in Bilozerka and Chornobaivka.<sup>[18]</sup> Ukrainian military official also noted that Russian officials continued to prepare defenses around Kherson City.<sup>[19]</sup>
- Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces are preparing to withdraw artillery units from unspecified areas on the western bank of the Dnipro River to possibly reinforce other directions.<sup>[20]</sup> Ukrainian military officials also reported that several hundred Rosgvardia servicemen deployed from the Republic of Chechnya to Kalanchak in southwestern Kherson Oblast.<sup>[21]</sup>
- Russian forces continued to shell Ukrainian positions in Beryslav Raion, Kherson Oblast, and both Ukrainian and Russian sources provided limited information regarding the situation on the Kherson Oblast frontline.<sup>[22]</sup>
- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces captured Vodyane, Donetsk Oblast, (4km northwest of Donetsk International Airport) on October 30.<sup>[23]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff’s evening report did not report repelling Russian attacks in this area as it usually does, potentially indicating that the Russian claims are accurate.
- Russian sources reported that Russian forces captured Pavlivka, Donetsk Oblast, (2km southwest of Vuhledar) on October 30.<sup>[24]</sup> Some Russian sources claim that Russian forces control only half of Pavlivka as of October 30.<sup>[25]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff’s evening report did not report repelling Russian attacks in this area as it usually does, potentially indicating that the Russian claims are accurate.

- Russian forces launched Kh-59 cruise missiles at Ochakiv, Mykolaiv Oblast.[26] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces targeted and destroyed military infrastructure in Ochakiv.[27]
- Mobilized men from Republic of Komi appealed to Russian authorities with complaints of insufficient military equipment and body armor.[28]
- Russia announced its intention to supply 500,000 tons of grain to the “poorest countries” following its withdrawal from the deal that allowed Ukraine to export its grain.[29] Ukraine announced that it intends to export agricultural products to maintain global food security.[30]
- Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces continued to create conditions in Nova Kakhovka to drive local inhabitants to evacuate.[31]
- Occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast announced a dual currency system that allows the use of both rubles and hryvnya, unwinding a months-long effort to enforce rubleization in the oblast.[32]

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 30, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 29

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan  
October 29, 7:30 pm ET  
[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Likely Ukrainian forces conducted an attack against a Grigorovich-class frigate of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) near Sevastopol with unmanned surface vehicles on October 29.** Social media footage documented an unknown number of unmanned surface vehicles striking at least one Grigorovich-class frigate in Sevastopol on October 29.<sup>[1]</sup> Footage also showed smoke near the port in Sevastopol and what appeared to be Russian air defense in Sevastopol engaging air targets.<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces used seven autonomous maritime drones and nine unmanned aerial vehicles to conduct a “terrorist attack” against the BSF and civilian targets in Sevastopol.<sup>[3]</sup> Attacks on military vessels in wartime are legitimate acts of war and not terrorist attacks. The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces destroyed all air targets, destroyed four maritime drones on the outer roadstead, and three maritime drones on the inner roadstead. A similar unidentified unmanned surface vehicle first appeared on the coast of Crimea on September 21.<sup>[4]</sup> Damage to Black Sea Fleet vessels is unclear at this time. The Russian MoD claimed that the attack inflicted minor damage against BSF minesweeper *Ivan Golubets* and a protective barrier in the south bay.<sup>[5]</sup> Russian officials did not acknowledge any damage to a Grigorovich-class frigate, similar to how the Russian MoD denied any damage to the cruiser *Moskva* when Ukrainian forces sunk it on April 14. Ukrainian officials have not claimed responsibility for the attack as of this publication. The Russian Foreign Ministry announced that Russia indefinitely suspended its participation in the United Nations-brokered grain export deal with Ukraine due to the attack on October 29.<sup>[6]</sup> Russia had been setting rhetorical conditions to withdraw from the deal for some time, however. The Black Sea Fleet has three Grigorovich-class frigates, all of which are capable of firing Kalibr cruise missiles. A Ukrainian decision to target Kalibr-capable frigate at this time makes sense given the intensified Russian drone and missile strike campaign targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure. If Kyiv ordered this attack, it would have been a proportionate, even restrained, response to the extensive Russian strategic bombing campaign attacking civilian targets throughout Ukraine over the past few weeks.

**The Kremlin reportedly relieved the commander of the Central Military District (CMD), Colonel General Alexander Lapin, of his position as the commander of the “central” group of forces in Ukraine.** The Kremlin has not officially confirmed Lapin’s relief as of October 29, prompting the rise of contradictory reports across Kremlin-sponsored outlets and Telegram channels. Kremlin-sponsored outlets cited reports from Chechnya-based TV channel “Grozny,” milbloggers, and other unnamed official sources that Lapin no longer commands Russian forces in northern Luhansk Oblast.<sup>[7]</sup> Some Russian milbloggers claimed that Lapin resigned on his own initiative, while others claimed that he was unfairly terminated.<sup>[8]</sup> A Wagner-affiliated milblogger claimed that Lapin lost his position due to his devastating failure to deploy and organize mobilized men in his zone of responsibility, and ISW has previously reported on the poor treatment of untrained mobilized men on the Svatove-Kremenna frontline under Lapin’s command.<sup>[9]</sup>

It is unclear whether Lapin was also relieved of his command of the Central Military District. Some milbloggers implied that Lapin is no longer the CMD commander as well, however, there is no clear reporting or evidence.<sup>[10]</sup> Local Russian outlet *Ura* claimed that Lapin is taking a three-week-long medical leave citing an unnamed Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) source.<sup>[11]</sup>

**ISW cannot independently confirm the reports of Lapin’s dismissal, but the deluge of conflicting reports may indicate that the Kremlin is struggling to control the narrative regarding its higher military command.** The Kremlin had previously refrained from discussing command changes before the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive in Lyman, after which Russian President Vladimir Putin formally replaced the commanders of the Western and Eastern Military Districts (WMD and EMD). Putin likely publicly reshuffled district commanders to use them as scapegoats for Russian military failures in Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman.<sup>[12]</sup> The increasing transparency within the Russian information space—spearheaded by the *siloviki* Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and the pro-war community—is likely making it more challenging for the Kremlin to conceal and explain away any command changes in public. Kadyrov and Prigozhin both have publicly attacked Lapin on several occasions, leading some milbloggers to point out that other Russian district commanders did not receive any criticism despite their own failings (and firings).<sup>[13]</sup> The reports of Lapin’s dismissal, whether true or false, indicate that the Russian *siloviki* faction is gaining dominance in the information space that allows it to damage the image of the Russian higher military command that the MoD would likely prefer to present. **Reports of Lapin’s dismissal further highlighted the fragmentation within the Russian pro-war community.** A milblogger who had defended Lapin stated that unspecified “lobbyists” had finally removed

Lapin from his post acting in their own self-interest, going against the pro-Lapin group of milbloggers.<sup>[14]</sup> Kremlin-leading Russian outlets also emphasized that a group of milbloggers supported Lapin, indicating the ever-growing influence of milbloggers in the information space.<sup>[15]</sup> The milblogger added that he and other pro-Lapin milbloggers faced criticism accusing the milbloggers of being on Lapin's payroll and producing propaganda in support of him. A pro-Wagner milblogger, in turn, stated that overwhelming cries in support of Lapin did not conceal his numerous military failures.<sup>[16]</sup> Milbloggers from both sides are effectively focusing on failures of Russian military command from either side of the argument, which further undermines the reputation of the Russian Armed Forces and the Kremlin.

**Russian pro-war milbloggers have recognized that Western-provided HIMARS halted Russian offensive operations in northwestern Kherson Oblast in July.** Some Russian milbloggers commented on satellite imagery of an empty Russian military base at the Kherson International Airport Chornobaivka (northwest of Kherson City) obtained from the private US company Satellogic. The milbloggers noted that Russian forces withdrew their "contingent," military equipment, and aviation from Chornobaivka between May and September in an effort to protect their equipment against Ukrainian strikes on the base.<sup>[17]</sup> One milblogger noted that while Russian forces withdrew some aviation elements from the base between May and June due to Ukrainian Tochka-U strikes, the introduction of HIMARS forced Russian command to establish a withdrawal plan from the base that concluded in September.<sup>[18]</sup> Another milblogger noted that the satellite images further confirmed that the situation on the northwestern Kherson Oblast frontline has not changed in two months and that withdrawn detachments did not return to their positions.<sup>[19]</sup> Previous satellite imagery from the August-September period showed at least 16 main battle tanks and armored personnel carriers at Chornobaivka, which indicates that the total Russian withdrawal from the Kherson International Airport is fairly recent.<sup>[20]</sup>

**Russia is likely expediting efforts to forcibly depopulate areas of Kherson Oblast along the Dnipro River and repopulate them with Russian soldiers, some out of uniform in violation of the law of armed conflict.** Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported on October 28 that Russian officials gave residents of Kherson City a two-day eviction notice and that Russian forces have introduced intensified inspection and verification checkpoints at roadblocks on the "evacuation" routes to Russian-occupied Crimea.<sup>[21]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff also stated on October 29 that Russian forces are continuing to forcibly evacuate civilians from Nova Kakhovka and that in Beryslav, Russian soldiers are changing into civilian clothes and moving into private residences *en masse*.<sup>[22]</sup> International law considers the "simulation of civilian status" to constitute a resort to perfidy, which is a violation of the laws of armed conflict.<sup>[23]</sup> Russia may be using resort to perfidy tactics to depopulate areas of Kherson Oblast and repopulate them with soldiers in civilian dress in order to set conditions to accuse Ukraine of striking civilian targets when attacking Russian military positions.

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is likely responding to pressure levied by milbloggers regarding its treatment of Russian prisoners of war (POWs) and the conduct of prisoner exchanges.** The Russian MoD announced on October 29 that Russia negotiated the release of 50 Russian prisoners of war but did not provide further details on the identities of the POWs or the terms of exchange. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin stated that seven of the POWs are DNR servicemen and that two are servicemen of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR).<sup>[24]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that in exchange 52 Ukrainian POWS returned from Russia.<sup>[25]</sup> The Russian MoD's announcement of the exchange is particularly noteworthy in light of recent milblogger criticism of the Russian MoD's previous handling of POWs and POW exchanges. As ISW reported on September 22, the Russian MoD faced substantial criticism for a POW exchange wherein 215 Ukrainian soldiers, including commanders of the Azov Regiment, were released in exchange for 55 Russian soldiers and political prisoners.<sup>[26]</sup> Russian sources additionally previously complained that the Russian MoD has neglected to contact and adequately care for Russian POWs and demanded that Russian authorities do more to secure the safety of POWs.<sup>[27]</sup> The Russian MoD is likely attempting to mitigate public pressure over the handling of POWs by presenting a more proactive approach to POW exchanges.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Likely Ukrainian forces conducted an attack against a Grigorovich-class frigate of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) near Sevastopol with unmanned surface vehicles on October 29.
- The Kremlin reportedly relieved the commander of the Central Military District (CMD), Colonel General Alexander Lapin, of his position as the commander of the "central" group of forces in Ukraine.

- Russia is likely expediting efforts to forcibly depopulate areas of Kherson Oblast along the Dnipro River and repopulate them with Russian soldiers, some of them out of uniform in violation of the law of armed conflict.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is likely responding to pressure levied by milbloggers regarding its treatment of Russian prisoners of war (POWs) and the conduct of prisoner exchanges.
- Ukrainian forces consolidated gains and continued counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Ukrainian intelligence indicated that the highest quality Russian troops are still responsible for the defense of Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to establish defensive positions on the western bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces likely slowed the pace of offensive operations in the Bakhmut area due to a Ukrainian strike.
- Russian sources claimed that Russian troops launched an offensive in the Vuhledar area.
- Russian troops likely made marginal gains around Donetsk City.
- The Kremlin reportedly instructed Russian judges to not grant prisoners parole but instead to direct them toward recruitment in unspecified private military companies (PMCs).
- The Kremlin is likely conducting an information operation to reduce tensions between Christians and Muslims in Russia to cater to religious minority groups within the Russian armed forces.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 29, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 28

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Riley Bailey, Katherine Lawlor, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 28, 8:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces are not making significant progress around Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast or anywhere else along the front lines.** A Russian information operation is advancing the narrative that Russian forces are making significant progress in Bakhmut, likely to improve morale among Russian forces and possibly to improve the personal standing of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose forces are largely responsible for the minimal gains in the area. Russian forces have made limited advances towards the Ukrainian strongpoint in Bakhmut but at a very slow speed and at great cost. Prigozhin acknowledged the slow pace of Wagner Group ground operations around Bakhmut on October 23 and stated that Wagner forces advance only 100-200m per day, which he absurdly claimed was a normal rate for modern advances.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian forces recaptured a concrete factory on the eastern outskirts of Bakhmut around October 24.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian military officials stated on October 16 that Russian forces had falsely claimed to have captured several towns near Bakhmut within the past several days, but Ukrainian forces held their lines against those Russian attacks.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian forces are likely falsifying claims of advances in the Bakhmut area to portray themselves as making gains in at least one sector amid continuing losses in northeast and southern Ukraine. Even the claimed rate of advance would be failure for a main effort in mechanized war--and the claims are, in fact, exaggerated.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu declared the end of Russian military mobilization on October 28.** Shoigu stated that military commissariats will recruit only volunteers and contract soldiers moving forward.<sup>[4]</sup> Shoigu stated that Russia mobilized 300,000 men, 82,000 of whom are deployed in Ukraine and 218,000 of whom are training at Russian training grounds.<sup>[5]</sup> Putin stated that 41,000 of the 82,000 servicemen in Ukraine are serving in combat units.<sup>[6]</sup> Putin acknowledged that Russian forces experienced logistical and supply issues with mobilized forces but falsely asserted that these problems affected only the "initial stage" of mobilization and that these problems are now solved.<sup>[7]</sup> Putin stated Russia must "draw necessary conclusions," modernize "the entire system of military registration and enlistment offices" and "think over and make adjustments to the structure of all components of the Armed Forces, including the Ground Forces."<sup>[8]</sup> Putin likely ended mobilization in Russia to free up administrative and training capacity in time for the delayed start of the Russian autumn conscription cycle, which will begin on November 1.<sup>[9]</sup> Russia's military likely does not have the capacity to simultaneously support training 218,000 mobilized men and approximately 120,000 new autumn conscripts.<sup>[10]</sup> It is unclear how autumn 2022 conscripts will complete their training, moreover, since the usual capstones for Russian conscripts' training involves joining a Russian military unit—which are already fighting in Ukraine and badly damaged. Russia's now-completed mobilization is unlikely to decisively impact Russian combat power. Putin described a 50-50 split between mobilized personnel in combat and support roles in Ukraine. If that ratio applies generally, it suggests that a total of 150,000 mobilized personnel will deploy to combat roles in Ukraine after training is complete, likely sometime in November. Russia's deployment of 41,000 poorly trained combat personnel to Ukraine may have temporarily stiffened Russian defensive lines, although these reservists have not yet faced the full weight of a major and prepared Ukrainian counteroffensive thrust. The deployment has not significantly increased Russian combat power. The deployment of an additional 110,000 or so mobilized men to combat units therefore remains unlikely to change the trajectory of the war.

**Putin may be attempting to reestablish Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's authority in the Russian information space to balance the growing influence of the Russian pro-war *siloviki* faction.** The Russian siloviki faction refers to people with meaningful power bases within Putin's inner circle who are fielding combat forces in Ukraine. Putin could have announced the end of mobilization himself instead of in a meeting with Shoigu or could have tasked Shoigu with concluding the flawed mobilization effort on his own. Their staged public meeting is consistent with the recent surge in Shoigu's media appearances. For example, Shoigu held several publicized calls with his Turkish, Chinese, and Western counterparts between October 23 and 26.<sup>[11]</sup> These high-profile meetings differentiate Shoigu and the Russian higher military command from the *siloviki*, who do not hold the same rank or authority despite their popularity in the Russian information space. Shoigu had made very limited public appearances over the spring and summer.<sup>[12]</sup> Shoigu's presence in the information space depends on the approval of the Kremlin, since Putin can control when and whether Shoigu speaks publicly. Shoigu's *siloviki* rivals control their own Telegram channels and speak freely to the media.

**The growing influence of the *siloviki* faction – led by Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin – is further fracturing the Russian pro-war community.** Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov for the second time criticized the commander of the Central Military District (CMD), Colonel General Alexander Lapin, for his management of the Svatove-Kreminna line on October 27.<sup>[13]</sup> Kadyrov contrasted his harsh criticisms of Lapin with high praise for Prigozhin and Wagner units, even calling Prigozhin a "born warrior." Kadyrov has resumed his criticisms of the progress of the Russian invasion and Russian higher military command since October 25, likely in response to a Ukrainian strike on Chechen units in northeastern Kherson Oblast.<sup>[14]</sup> Kadyrov has since announced that the Ukrainian strike killed 23 Chechen fighters and wounded 58 troops.<sup>[15]</sup>

Kadyrov accused Lapin of failing to communicate with Chechen leaders, claiming that he had unsuccessfully attempted to reach Lapin to discuss Ukrainian breakthroughs around Lyman. Kadyrov added that no one could locate Lapin or his subordinates when one of Lapin's units redeployed from Rubizhne to reinforce the frontlines.<sup>[16]</sup> Kadyrov claimed that Chechen units had to hold Russian defensive positions without Lapin's support, stated that soldiers are increasingly deserting from Lapin's units, and insinuated that Lapin will soon lose Svatove.<sup>[17]</sup> Kadyrov previously attacked Lapin on October 1 for moving his headquarters far from the frontlines and for his military failures, and Prigozhin publicly agreed with Kadyrov's statement at that time.<sup>[18]</sup> Kadyrov's praise of Prigozhin further demonstrates that *siloviki* are increasingly promoting their parallel military structures at the expense of the reputation of the Russian Armed Forces.

Kadyrov's accusations have once again created a rift among pro-war Russian milbloggers and exposed concerns over the growing influence of the *siloviki* faction within the pro-war community. Some milbloggers expressed their support for Lapin, noting that his failures – such as large losses of military equipment in Chernihiv Oblast or the devastating failure at the Siverskyi Donets river crossing in Bilohorivka – were not as severe as other failures of some Russian military commanders even though these same milbloggers had indirectly criticized Lapin for these incidents.<sup>[19]</sup> Most pro-Lapin milbloggers blamed the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for abstaining from publicly defending Lapin against the likes of Kadyrov and Prigozhin. A milblogger even noted that it is unacceptable for any Russian governor or regional head to criticize the Russian Armed Forces as such critiques can lead "to the direct road to the erosion of the very essence of the Russian state."<sup>[20]</sup> Kadyrov's only formal position is head of the Chechen Republic. The milblogger noted that Russian commanders cannot defend their actions on Telegram – unlike Prigozhin and Kadyrov – and stated that such critiques only ignite internal conflicts. Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels, by contrast, amplified reports of dire conditions on the Svatove-Kreminna frontline, discussing the high number of deserters, low morale, poor living conditions, and command cowardice.<sup>[21]</sup>

Kadyrov's second critique of Lapin indicates a further fragmentation within the pro-war community that may allow Prigozhin to accrue more power in the long-term. Putin will need to continue to appease the *siloviki* faction while attempting to support his disgraced higher military command and retain favor with the milbloggers that respect some conventional Russian military commanders such as Lapin and the Commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, Sergei Surovikin.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces are not making significant progress around Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast or anywhere else along the front lines.**
- **President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced the end of partial mobilization.**
- **Putin may be attempting to rehabilitate Shoigu's image in the information space to counter the growing influence of the pro-war *siloviki* faction.**
- **The growing influence of the *siloviki* faction is continuing to fracture the Russian pro-war community.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kreminna and Svatove.**
- **Russian forces continued to deploy mobilized personnel to and establish defensive positions on the west bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in northwestern Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.**

- Russian occupation authorities completed their "evacuation" of parts of occupied Kherson Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities reportedly plan to force Russian citizenship on Ukrainian civilians in occupied parts of Ukraine by October 30, likely in part to legalize the forced mobilization of Ukrainian civilians as part of the November 1 autumn conscription cycle.
- Russian occupation authorities are continuing their attempts to erase Ukrainian history, culture, and national identity in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine.



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 27

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

George Barros, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 27, 7:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to reject the idea of Ukrainian sovereignty in a way that is fundamentally incompatible with serious negotiations.** Putin continued to reject Ukrainian sovereignty during a speech at the Valdai Discussion Club on October 27. Putin stated that the "single real guarantee of Ukrainian sovereignty" can only be Russia, which "created" Ukraine.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin reiterated that it is a "historical fact" that Ukrainians and Russians are fundamentally "one people" that were wrongly separated into "different states."<sup>[2]</sup> Putin stated on October 26 that Ukraine has "lost its sovereignty" and become a NATO vassal.<sup>[3]</sup>

Putin's statements reject the legal fact that Ukraine is a fully sovereign state, that the Russian Federation recognized Ukraine's sovereignty, and that the Ukrainian people exist as a distinct nation. Putin's perpetuation of the narrative that Ukraine and Russia are a single people separated into different states by arbitrary historical circumstance indicates his continued objective to destroy the Ukrainian state and erase the notion of a Ukrainian people. He added during the question-and-answer period that "if some part of that single ethnicity at some moment decided that it had reached such a level as to consider itself a separate people, then one could only respond with respect."<sup>[4]</sup> The many conditionals in this comment underscore Putin's rejection of the idea that there is currently any independent Ukrainian national identity. These statements, along with many Russian actions, must cause serious reflection on the question of whether Russia's war against Ukraine is a genocidal action since genocide is legally defined as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group."<sup>[5]</sup>

**A senior Russian official threatened that Russia could target Western commercial satellites supporting Ukraine.** Russian Foreign Ministry Deputy Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Konstantin Vorontsov told the United Nations that the United States and its allies were trying to use space to enforce Western dominance and that "quasi-civilian infrastructure may be a legitimate target for a retaliatory strike."<sup>[6]</sup> Reuters reported that US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby stated that the United States will meet any attack on US infrastructure "with a response."<sup>[7]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin continues to reject Ukrainian sovereignty in a way that is fundamentally incompatible with serious negotiations.**
- **A senior Russian official threatened that Russia could target Western commercial satellites supporting Ukraine.**
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast and along the Kreminna-Lysychansk line.
- Russian forces are continuing to make defensive preparations along the east bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited ground assaults in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- The Russian military sent mobilization notices to foreign citizens working in Russia.
- Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group may be further developing its air warfare capabilities and fielding more complex equipment on par with the conventional Russian military.
- Russian and occupation administration officials began seizing residents' cell phones in Russian-occupied territories to support law enforcement and operational security measures.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 26

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

George Barros, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 26, 7:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**A Reuters investigation of a document trove found in an abandoned Russian command post in Balakliya, Kharkiv Oblast, supports ISW's longstanding assessments about the poor condition of Russian forces.** ISW has long assessed that the conventional Russian military in Ukraine is severely degraded and has largely lost offensive capabilities since the summer of 2022, that Russian strategic commanders have been micromanaging operational commanders' decisions on tactical matters, and that Russian morale is very low. *Reuters'* investigation found that Russian units near Balakliya were severely understrength, with a combat battalion at 19.6-percent strength and a reserve unit at 23-percent strength.<sup>[1]</sup> The investigation found that poor morale, bad logistics, and overbearing commanders contributed to Russian forces' poor performance.<sup>[2]</sup> The report found that the Russian Western Military District explicitly forbade a subordinate from withdrawing from an untenable position in the small village of Hrakove (which has an area of less than three square kilometers).<sup>[3]</sup> Ukrainian forces defeated Russian forces in Balakiya and routed Russian forces in eastern Kharkiv Oblast around September 8-10.<sup>[4]</sup>

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's rhetoric indicates that he is not interested in negotiating seriously with Ukraine and retains maximalist objectives for the war.** Putin stated that Ukraine has "lost sovereignty" in a meeting with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) security officials on October 26.<sup>[5]</sup> Putin stated that the United States is using Ukraine as a "battering ram" against Russia, the Russian-Belarusian Union State, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the CIS. Russian State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin amplified this narrative, stating that "Ukraine has lost the ability to exist as a state," "Ukraine is occupied by NATO," and "[Ukraine] has become a colony of the US" on October 26.<sup>[6]</sup> This language is incompatible with negotiations on an equal basis for a ceasefire, let alone a resolution to the conflict that Russia began. It instead strongly suggests that the Kremlin still seeks a military victory in Ukraine and regime change in Kyiv that would affect the permanent reorientation of Ukraine away from the West and into Russia's control. It also indicates that Putin's aims transcend the territory he has claimed to have annexed, let alone the areas his forces actually control.

**Russian occupation officials in Kherson Oblast are attempting to mitigate the informational consequences of the chaos of the initial Russian withdrawals from the west bank of the Dnipro River.** Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo stated on October 26 that it would be "practically impossible" to completely destroy the dam at the Kakhovka hydroelectric power plant (HPP) and that even the destruction of the dam locks at the HPP would only cause the water level of the Dnipro River to rise less than 2 meters.<sup>[7]</sup> Saldo's statement directly contradicts his own prior statements and the warnings made by Commander of Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergey Surovikin on October 18 that Ukraine is planning to strike the Kakhovka HPP and cause flood damage along the Dnipro River.<sup>[8]</sup> Saldo's apparent retraction of his own warnings may suggest that he seeks to quell anxiety accompanying the mass movement of civilians and Russian military and occupation elements across the Dnipro in order to preserve his own ability to rule. Saldo also issued assurances about the provision of basic utilities and financial services that he claimed will continue even as evacuations to the east bank are ongoing.<sup>[9]</sup> Saldo's statements indicate that his administration is attempting to mitigate panic in the information space, likely in order to maintain control of the population of Kherson Oblast against the backdrop of ongoing evacuations.

**Russian forces conducted an assault on Ternova, Kharkiv Oblast, likely to fix Ukrainian forces there and prevent them from reinforcing Ukrainian counteroffensive operations elsewhere.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 26 that Ukrainian forces repelled an attack on Ternova (40km northeast of Kharkiv city) which is well removed from areas encompassed by the eastern Ukrainian counteroffensive.<sup>[10]</sup> Russian forces likely do not intend to regain limited territory in border areas of Kharkiv Oblast but instead likely hope to keep Ukrainian forces in the area that otherwise could join counteroffensive operations. Russian forces are likely hoping for a similar outcome in northwestern

Ukraine with their deployment of forces to the joint grouping of forces in Belarus and the messaging around it.

**Russian officials continued to admit that Russia is deporting children to Russia under the guise of adoption and vacation schemes.** Russian media reported on October 26 that the Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, adopted a Ukrainian child who was deported from Mariupol to Russia.[11] Lvova-Belova claimed that Russian officials have brought 31 children from Mariupol to Russia and that her office is working to "rehabilitate" Ukrainian children from active combat zones. As ISW has previously reported, the forced adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families may constitute a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[12]

Russia is also continuing to use the excuse of recreational trips to deport Ukrainian children to Russia and Russian-occupied territory. Member of the Zaporizhia occupation administration Vladimir Rogov reported on October 26 that over 500 children from Enerhodar went on "vacation" in Yevpatoria, Crimea and Anapa, Krasnodar Krai this year alone.[13] Rogov claimed that the children received "new knowledge" as part of the "educational program." [14] Russian-appointed governor of Sevastopol Mikhail Razvozhaev similarly claimed that children from occupied Kherson City and Enerhodar took part in "excursions" in Sevastopol.[15] These reports are consistent with ISW's previous observations that Russian officials have used the veneer of such recreation and rehabilitation programs to justify the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russian-controlled territory and areas of the Russian Federation.[16]

**On October 26, Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin denied ISW's report that Prigozhin confronted Putin and other siloviki factions in the Kremlin regarding the progress of the Russian war in Ukraine.[17]** Prigozhin explicitly denied ISW's October 25 assessment and falsely insinuated that ISW receives classified intelligence. ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. ISW specifically does not receive information from Prigozhin's deceased mother-in-law, as he (ironically) suggested.

### **Key Takeaways**

- A Reuters investigation of Russian documents from Balakliya supports previous ISW assessments about the poor conditions of Russian forces.
- Putin stated that Ukraine has "lost its sovereignty" in an October 26 speech indicating that Russia likely retains its maximalist objectives in Ukraine and remains resistant to negotiations.
- Russian occupation officials in Kherson Oblast are attempting to mitigate the informational consequences of the Russian withdrawal from the west bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces are attempting to fix Ukrainian forces on Ukraine's northern border.
- Russian officials continued to acknowledge that Russian authorities are deporting Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of adoption and vacation schemes.
- Yevgeny Prigozhin denied a previous ISW assessment that stated he confronted Putin and other *siloviki* factions regarding the progress of the war in Ukraine.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations west of Svatove.
- Russian forces continued to prepare defensive positions on the west and east banks of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensive operations in northwest Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- The Russian military is reportedly attempting to recruit foreigners to support its war effort in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation officials in Kherson Oblast continued to relocate residents from the west bank of the Dnipro River.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 25

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 25, 7:00 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Members of the Russian *siloviki* faction continue to voice their dissatisfaction with Russian war efforts in Ukraine, indicating that Russian President Vladimir Putin will continue to struggle to appease the pro-war constituency in the long term. The Russian *siloviki* faction refers to people with meaningful power bases within Putin's inner circle who are fielding combat forces in Ukraine. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov complained that the Russian response to claimed Ukrainian strikes on Russian territory have been "weak," noting that Russia must "erase Ukrainian cities from the earth."<sup>[1]</sup> Kadyrov also claimed that Russia is now engaged in a war with Ukraine instead of a "special military operation," given that Ukrainian forces are fighting on "Russian territory." Kadyrov noted that he is unhappy with the lack of Russian retaliation despite the establishment of martial law. Kadyrov had remained relatively quiet throughout October.

Kadyrov's statement indirectly criticizes the scale of the Russian missile campaign against Ukrainian energy infrastructure and is in line with milblogger critiques that followed days after the first massive campaign on October 10.<sup>[2]</sup> ISW has previously assessed that that Putin's missile campaign is unlikely to satisfy the pro-war nationalist camp in the long term, given that Putin cannot fix the many flaws within the Russian military campaign in Ukraine nor can he deliver his maximalist promises.<sup>[3]</sup> Kadyrov's rant also highlights Putin's error in annexing four Ukrainian oblasts before Russian forces reached the oblasts' borders, which has created confusion about where "Russian territory" begins. ISW has previously reported that Putin's annexation of Ukrainian territories has likely triggered criticism within the Kremlin elite, which will likely intensify as Putin loses more occupied territories.<sup>[4]</sup>

Russian *siloviki* have also directly confronted Putin regarding the progress of the Russian war in Ukraine, which further highlights their significance within Russian power structures. *The Washington Post*, citing US intelligence, revealed that Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin sharply criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) in a private conversation.<sup>[5]</sup> Prigozhin reportedly accused the Russian MoD of heavily relying on Wagner forces while failing to finance the group or provide necessary resources, which is consistent with his numerous public statements.<sup>[6]</sup> Prigozhin has denied ever criticizing the Russian Armed Forces in response to *The Washington Post* report—a denial that is patently false given his repeated public attacks on the MoD.<sup>[7]</sup>

The criticism revealed by *The Post* further supports ISW's assessment that Prigozhin holds a unique position that allows him to reap the benefits of Putin's dependency on Wagner forces without having formal responsibility for any axis or area in Ukraine and while wielding considerable influence in the information space. Prigozhin is accumulating a following on Telegram (with some Wagner-affiliated channels having over 300,000 followers), is directly interacting with online publications, and is reportedly financing the RiaFan (Federal News Agency) media conglomerate.<sup>[8]</sup> Prigozhin is likely using a growing number of platforms to accrue power and has even previously engaged RiaFan in promoting his September prisoner recruitment drive to Russian audiences.<sup>[9]</sup> **Putin's regime is largely dependent on Putin's monopolization of the state information space, but Prigozhin is increasingly challenging that monopoly.**

Prigozhin's influence in the information space is evident through the positive portrayal of Wagner forces, despite their failure to make significant advances in the Bakhmut area. Wagner forces have yet to reach Bakhmut despite fighting there since early summer and are reportedly suffering significant losses.<sup>[10]</sup> Prigozhin himself admitted that Wagner forces advance only 100-200 meters a day, which he absurdly and falsely claimed is the norm for modern warfare.<sup>[11]</sup> Wagner forces are plagued with the same supply and troop quality issues that Prigozhin's criticizes the Russian MoD for allowing to occur within the Russian Armed Forces. Prigozhin, for instance, denied seeing a video in which Wagner troops complained about the lack of food and supplies.<sup>[12]</sup> The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) also noted that Wagner prisoner recruits suffer from serious infectious diseases like HIV and

Hepatitis C, and that Russian doctors are refusing to assist a growing number of infected troops when they are wounded in combat.[13]

Prigozhin is able to shape the narrative within Russian milblogger community by consistently deflecting attention from his forces by demeaning the Russian higher military command. He will likely retain his upper hand despite his forces' lack of advances given the Russian information restrictions on the Russian MoD. Prigozhin's close interactions with the media and online community allows him to address any criticism or unfavorable narratives in real time, unlike the Russian MoD or the Kremlin. Prigozhin, for example, denied his involvement with Russian war criminal Igor Girkin less than a day after Russian milbloggers suggested that Girkin is forming a Wagner-based volunteer battalion.[14]

**Russian officials are increasingly attempting to rhetorically align Russia's war in Ukraine with religious concepts ostensibly accessible to both Christians and Muslims, likely in order to cater to religious minority groups within the Russian armed forces.** Assistant Secretary to the Russian Security Council Alexei Pavlov amplified statements made by Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov on October 25 that the goal of the war in Ukraine should be "complete de-Satanization." [15] Pavlov claimed that Ukrainian society is defined by "fanatics" who seek to abandon values held by the Russian Orthodox church, Islam, and Judaism.[16] Kadyrov also declared that the war on Ukraine is now a jihad against Ukrainian "Satanism." [17] These statements may represent a desire to deflect dissent among religious minority groups in the Russian Armed Forces. As ISW previously reported, recent schisms between Muslim and non-Muslim servicemen have caused violent outbursts in Russia ranks.[18] The invocation of war on religious but not overtly Christian grounds is likely an attempt to transcend religious divides and set information conditions for continued recruitment of ethnic and religious minorities to fight in Ukraine.

**Russian occupation officials continued to indicate that efforts to "evacuate" civilians in Kherson Oblast to the east bank of Dnipro River are part of a wider resettlement scheme.** Kherson occupation deputy Kirill Stremousov claimed on October 25 that occupation officials have moved over 22,000 people from the west bank of the Dnipro to the east bank and that the administration's "resettlement program" (программа переселения) is designed to accommodate 60,000 people.[19] Stremousov's statement seemingly admits that Russian occupation officials view the evacuations as precursors to the permanent resettlement of a large population of Ukrainians. It is unclear where Russian officials intend to "resettle" those who move from the west bank. The implication of a permanent program designed to resettle Ukrainians in other Russian-occupied territories, and even within Russia itself, may amount to a violation of international law.[20] According to international law, an occupying power has the right to evacuate civilians for their safety with the necessary stipulation that such evacuations are temporary.[21] The implication of a "resettlement program" seems to suggest that Russian officials intend to permanently resettle large parts of Kherson Oblast's population.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin held a coordination council meeting on October 25 in which Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin expressed a need to enact additional security measures in border oblasts, likely indicating that the Kremlin intends to utilize recent martial law decrees.**[22] Putin also said that the Russian government needs to work at a high pace and according to an extremely realistic assessment of the national security situation. Sobyanin indicated that Russian officials are proceeding with planned security measures throughout the Russian Federation. These comments indicate that the Kremlin intends to utilize recent martial law declarations to ease mobilization and military efforts occurring within the Russian Federation.

**Russian independent polling organization Levada posted survey results on October 25 showing that the number of Russians desiring change has declined despite recent societal stresses introduced by sanctions, mobilization, and the war in Ukraine.**[23] The Levada surveys conducted in late September show that the percentage of Russians who believe that Russia needs decisive, full-scale changes decreased from 59 percent in July 2019 to 47 percent in October 2022. The surveys show that the percentage of the Russian public that believes Russia needs only minor changes increased from 31 percent in July 2019 to 36 percent in October 2022 as did the number of Russians who said that Russia needs no change whatsoever, from 8 percent to 13 percent. The Levada surveys show that of those Russians desiring full-scale change, only 11 percent desire a change of government in some fashion. The Levada surveys also show that of those Russians desiring full-scale change, 10 percent desire that the

war in Ukraine ends and that Russia begins negotiations with Ukraine. Many changes that Russians wish for are primarily focused on domestic economic issues.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian *siloviki* factions continue to voice dissatisfaction with the Russian war effort in Ukraine, likely indicating that President Vladimir Putin will struggle to appease the pro-war faction.
- Direct confrontations between Putin and *siloviki* members regarding the war in Ukraine illustrate the significance of *siloviki* factions in Russian power structures.
- Russian officials are likely rhetorically realigning the war in Ukraine with religious ideals ostensibly accessible to both Christians and Muslims to cater to religious and ethnic minorities.
- Russian occupation officials continue to claim that the evacuations in Kherson Oblast are a part of a larger resettlement program.
- Levada polling surveys suggest that the Russian public's sentiments toward the Russian government have not fundamentally changed despite societal pressures associated with the war in Ukraine.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks west of Svatove and on Kreminna on October 25.
- Russian forces continued to establish fallback and defensive positions on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- The Russian military continues to mobilize personnel in violation of recruitment policies. Russian mobilization efforts also are placing strains on the Russian labor market.
- Ukrainian partisans conducted an attack targeting the occupation head in Russian-occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 24

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, and Fredrick W. Kagan  
October 24, 8:30 PM ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin intensified its information operation to accuse Ukraine of preparing to conduct a **false-flag attack using a dirty bomb for a second day in a row on October 24**. Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov separately called his counterparts from the United Kingdom and United States about the “situation connected with Ukraine’s possible use of a dirty bomb” (a conventional explosive laced with radioactive material that is not a nuclear weapon) on October 24.[1] Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu made similar calls with his counterparts from the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Turkey on October 23.[2] The Chief of Russia’s Radiation, Chemical, and Biological Protection Forces, Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, gave a lengthy briefing accusing Ukraine of planning a dirty bomb false-flag provocation to accuse Russia of detonating a low-yield nuclear weapon in Ukraine on October 24.[3] Russian military bloggers are amplifying this information operation.[4] ISW assesses the Kremlin is unlikely to be preparing an imminent false-flag dirty bomb attack.[5]

**Russian forces conducted air, missile, and drone strikes against targets in Ukraine at a markedly slower tempo than in previous days.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 24 that Russian forces conducted 2 missile and 28 air strikes, and Ukrainian forces shot down 16 Shahed-136 drones on October 23.[6] The slower tempo of Russian air, missile, and drone strikes possibly reflects decreasing missile and drone stockpiles and the strikes’ limited effectiveness of accomplishing Russian strategic military goals.

Ukraine’s Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief, Major General Kyrylo Budanov, stated on October 24 that the impact of Russian terrorist strikes against critical Ukrainian infrastructure is waning as Russian

forces further deplete their limited arsenal of cruise missiles.[7] Budanov stated that Russian forces have stopped targeting Ukraine's military infrastructure, instead aiming for civilian infrastructure to incite panic and fear in Ukrainians. Budanov noted, however, that Russian forces will fail as Ukrainians are better adapted to strategic bombing than at the beginning of the war. Budanov claimed that Russian forces have used most of their cruise missile arsenal and only have 13 percent of their pre-war Iskander, 43 percent of Kaliber, and 45 percent of Kh-101 and Kh-555 pre-war stockpiles left, supporting ISW's prior reports on dwindling Russian precision-guided munition stockpiles.[8] Budanov noted that Russian cruise missiles lack precision, as a missile likely intended to hit the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) building in Kyiv missed its target by 800 meters. Budanov stated that Russia's dwindling supply of cruise missiles is forcing the Russian military to rely on Iranian drones but that Iranian suppliers only send 300 drones per shipment and that the drones take a long time to manufacture. Budanov stated that Ukrainian air defenses shoot down 70 percent of all Shahed-136 drones, including 222 of the 330 Russia has used so far. It is impossible to assess the degree to which ongoing unrest and growing strikes in Iran might interfere with Tehran's ability to manufacture and ship drones to Russia.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts on September 30 ignited a schism within the Kremlin, which will likely intensify as Ukraine liberates more territories, according to Budanov.** Budanov stated that Kremlin elites largely did not support Putin's decision to annex Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk Oblasts prior to securing those territories, prompting many officials to contact their Western counterparts to express their disinterest in continuing the war in Ukraine.[9] Budanov claimed that some Kremlin officials began advocating for negotiations with Ukraine to their Western counterparts while the Russian military-political command plotted missile strikes to scare Ukrainians into negotiations. Budanov's statement is consistent with the influx of Western reports about direct criticism of Putin within the Kremlin less than a week after the annexation announcement around October 6.[10] Wagner Group-affiliated Telegram channels also noted the emergence of the pro-war and pro-negotiations factions within the Kremlin within the same timeframe.[11] Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin has been consistently referencing the factionalization within the Kremlin since, even explicitly stating that he is part of the "war until victory" faction.[12] **These observations raise the possibility that hints from insiders of a Kremlin readiness to engage in serious negotiations may not reflect Putin's own views or any decisions he has taken but may instead be part of efforts by those who have lost the internal argument with him to persuade the West and Ukraine to offer concessions in hopes of bringing him around to their point of view.**

**Prigozhin continues to accrue power and is setting up a military structure parallel to the Russian Armed Forces, which may come to pose a threat to Putin's rule — at least within the information space.** Russian milbloggers reported that Prigozhin is sponsoring the formation of a Wagner-based volunteer battalion recruited by a Russian war criminal and former Federal Security Service (FSB) officer Igor Girkin.[13] Girkin is an avid critic of the Russian higher military command and a prominent figure among the Russian ultra-nationalists who participated in the annexation of Crimea or the illegal Russian seizures of Ukrainian territory in Donbas in 2014. Milbloggers noted that the structure of the Russian Armed Forces has long prevented Girkin from forming his own volunteer battalion due to lack of supplies and other bureaucratic restrictions, while Prigozhin has the luxury to operate Wagner forces without the direct supervision of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Milbloggers also noted that the Prigozhin-Girkin collaboration is likely making a large nationalist constituency accessible to Prigozhin in support of his maximalist goals for the war in Ukraine.[14]

Prigozhin holds a uniquely advantageous position within the Russian state structure and information space that allows him to expand his constituency in Russia more readily than the disgraced Russian higher military command. Prigozhin can freely promote himself and his forces while criticizing Kremlin officials or the Russian Armed Force without fear of pushback.[15] Putin depends on Wagner forces in Bakhmut and is likely attempting to appease Prigozhin despite the fact that Prigozhin is undermining the conventional Russian military. Prigozhin, for example, sarcastically stated in an interview that he is constructing the "Wagner Line" in an effort to make Russian Armed Forces that "hide behind Wagner's backs" feel safe.[16] Prigozhin also frequently levies his critiques of the Russian military in interviews with Russian online publications and among Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels, which allow him to reach and interact with audiences inaccessible to the Russian MoD, which is restricted in its public statements and means of communication. Prigozhin also benefits from holding no formal position of responsibility. He

is not in command of any axis in Ukraine nor in charge of any major bureaucratic effort. He can critique those who are in positions of authority freely without fear that anyone can point to something he was specifically responsible for that he failed to achieve.

Prigozhin has seemingly distanced himself from a fellow strongman, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, after their joint critiques of the Russian higher military command on October 1 drew much attention.[17] This rhetorical shift may indicate that Kadyrov is losing influence and standing and may fear losing his control over the Republic of Chechnya amid the Chechen public's growing disapproval of his demands in support of Putin's war.[18]

**Racism and bigotry continue to plague the Russian Armed Forces, increasing the likelihood of ethnic conflicts.** Russian social media footage showed a Russian officer beating a Muslim soldier for attempting to pray at a certain time.[19] While Russian milbloggers denied the authenticity of the footage, previous instances of violence along religious or ethnic lines, such as the shooting on a Belgorod Oblast training ground on October 15, indicate that such problems will intensify throughout time.[20] Racial and religious tensions may also help explain Kadyrov's relative quieting and Prigozhin's apparent separation from him.

**Russian forces are likely preparing to defend Kherson City and are not fully withdrawing from upper Kherson Oblast despite previous confirmed reports of some Russian elements withdrawing from upper Kherson.**[21] Budanov stated on October 24 that Russian forces are not retreating from Kherson City but are instead preparing the city for urban combat.[22] This report is consistent with indicators that ISW has observed in late October.[23] Recent reporting about Russian military operations in Kherson have not always distinguished clearly enough between activities in Kherson City and those in western Kherson Oblast generally. Russian forces have begun a partial withdrawal from northwestern Kherson Oblast even while preparing to defend Kherson City. They have not launched into a full withdrawal from the city or the oblast as of this report.

The Russian position in upper Kherson Oblast is, nevertheless, likely untenable; and Ukrainian forces will likely capture upper Kherson Oblast by the end of 2022. A Russian milblogger stated that Russia's surrender even of Kherson City is overdue, as an attempt to hold the city will likely result in defeat.[24] This milblogger argued that if Russia's military command decides to wage the war in Ukraine to a successful end, then the surrender of Kherson City is "nothing terrible" in the long run. The Russian military likely has not prepared the information space for a military defeat in Kherson Oblast as of October 24. A Russian milblogger wrote that his Russian military contacts in Kherson Oblast do not want to nor plan to retreat.[25] Russian media has not discussed the possibility of a major military loss in Kherson Oblast besides promoting information operations about a Ukrainian false-flag attack against the Kakhova Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) Dam.[26]

**Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russian forces have not yet laid enough explosives to fully destroy the HPP Dam as of October 24.**[27] Budanov observed that the Russians have prepared parts of the dam for limited explosions that would not unleash the full force of the reservoir's waters. The Russians may seek to damage the top portion of the dam, including the road that runs across it, to prevent the Ukrainians from following after retreating Russian forces if and when the Russians abandon the western bank of the Dnipro River.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Kremlin intensified its information operation to accuse Ukraine of preparing to conduct a false-flag attack using a dirty bomb for a second day in a row.
- Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Major General Kyrylo Budanov stated on October 24 that the impact of Russian terrorist strikes against critical Ukrainian infrastructure is waning.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts on September 30 ignited a schism within the Kremlin, which will likely intensify as Ukraine liberates more territories according to Budanov.

- Prigozhin continues to accrue power and is setting up a military structure parallel to the Russian Armed Forces, which may come to pose a threat to Putin's rule – at least within the information space.
- Russian forces are likely preparing to defend Kherson City and are not fully withdrawing from upper Kherson Oblast despite previous confirmed reports of some Russian elements withdrawing from upper Kherson Oblast.
- The Ukrainian General Staff confirmed that Ukrainian forces captured Karmazynivka, Miasozharivka, and Nevske in Luhansk Oblast and Novosadove in Donetsk Oblast.
- Kursk Oblast Governor Roman Starovoit announced the completion of the construction of two reinforced defense lines on the border with Ukraine on October 23 — likely an act of security theater designed to target a domestic Russian audience since there is no danger whatsoever of a Ukrainian mechanized invasion of Russia.
- Wagner Group financer Yevgeny Prigozhin acknowledged the slow pace of Wagner Group ground operations around Bakhmut as Russian forces continued to lose ground near the city.
- Ukrainian forces continued targeting Russian force concentrations near the Zaporizhia Oblast front line on October 23–24 and struck a Russian force and equipment concentration in the vicinity of Enerhodar on October 22.
- Hurried Russian mobilization efforts to fix personnel shortages on the front lines have cannibalized the Russian force-generation staff and diminished Russia's ability to effectively train and deploy new personnel and to staff domestic industries.
- Occupation administration officials have taken down communications systems in Kherson City in an attempt to limit civilian reporting on Russian positions to Ukrainian forces ahead of anticipated Ukrainian advances.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 23

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

By Mason Clark

October 23, 5:30pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, October 23. This report focuses on Russian Defense Minister Shoigu's several calls with his western counterparts and preposterous claims that Ukraine is preparing a false-flag "dirty bomb" attack against Russia, likely to pressure Ukraine into concessions and intimidate NATO. On the battlefield, Ukrainian forces conducted further offensive operations in northeastern Ukraine, and Russian forces continued to set conditions for a withdrawal from Kherson. Those developments are summarized briefly and will be covered in more detail tomorrow.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu likely sought to slow or suspend Western military aid to Ukraine and possibly weaken the NATO alliance in scare-mongering calls with several NATO defense ministers on October 23. Shoigu separately called his counterparts from France, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States on October 23, claiming that Ukraine is preparing to conduct a false-flag attack using a dirty bomb (a conventional explosive laced with radioactive material that is not a nuclear weapon) to accuse Russia of using weapons of mass destruction.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian state media amplified this false and ridiculous claim.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian Ministry of Defense reports on the calls contain slight differences; they state that Shoigu discussed a claimed "steady tendency towards further, uncontrolled escalation" in Ukraine in the call with his French counterpart; discussed the "situation in Ukraine" and made false claims that Ukraine is preparing to use a dirty bomb in his calls with the United Kingdom, France, and Turkey; and simply discussed the situation in Ukraine without reference to a dirty bomb in his conversation with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin. Shoigu last spoke with Secretary Austin on October 21. Representatives from the United States, United Kingdom, and Ukraine categorically denied and condemned Shoigu's false allegations, and US Secretary Austin called his UK counterpart, Ben Wallace, following the calls with Shoigu.<sup>[3]</sup> France and Turkey have not issued formal statements as of this writing.

**The Kremlin is unlikely to be preparing an imminent false-flag dirty bomb attack.** Shoigu's claims further a longstanding Russian information campaign. The Kremlin has repeatedly claimed that Western states will help Ukraine conduct a false-flag WMD attack since the earliest stages of its invasion of Ukraine in February. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed it had information the US was "preparing provocations to accuse the Russian Armed Forces of using chemical, biological, or tactical nuclear weapons" in April.<sup>[4]</sup> Putin claimed in his pre-invasion speech on February 24 that Ukraine was preparing for a nuclear attack against Russia, and Russian state disinformation outlets repeatedly claimed Western states were supporting Ukraine's development of nuclear weapons and planning false-flag attacks.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Shoigu's claims likely do not portend Russian preparations to use non-strategic nuclear weapons in Ukraine either.** ISW previously stated on September 30 that "ISW cannot forecast the point at which Putin would decide to use nuclear weapons. Such a decision would be inherently personal, but Putin's stated red lines for nuclear weapon use have already been crossed in this war several times over without any Russian nuclear escalation."<sup>[6]</sup> Russia does not "need," under formal Russian nuclear doctrine, a further event to justify nuclear weapons use.<sup>[7]</sup> Ukraine is not apparently on the verge of tripping some new Russian redline, on the other hand, that might cause Putin to use non-strategic nuclear weapons against it at this time. Shoigu's comments are thus unlikely to presage a nuclear terror attack against one or more major Ukrainian population centers or critical infrastructure in hopes of shocking Ukraine into surrender or the West into cutting off aid to Ukraine. Such attacks would be highly unlikely to force Ukraine or the West to surrender, as Ukraine's government and people have repeatedly demonstrated their will to continue fighting, and the West would find it very challenging simply to surrender in the face of such horrific acts because of the precedent such surrender would set.

Shoigu's calls—and Russian state media's amplification of false dirty bomb threats—are therefore likely intended to intimidate Western states into cutting or limiting support for Ukraine as Russia faces continued military setbacks and the likely loss of western Kherson by the end of the year. ISW has assessed since May that Putin seeks to force Ukraine to accept his terms and deter continued Western support for Ukraine through nuclear brinksmanship.<sup>[8]</sup> The recipients of Shoigu's calls are also notable. The Kremlin has repeatedly framed the United States and the United Kingdom as Ukraine's primary backers and the enablers of what it claims are aggressive policies toward Russia, while France and Turkey have (to varying degrees) framed themselves as mediators in the conflict. Shoigu's round of calls was likely further Russian saber-rattling to intimidate Ukraine's Western supporters and possibly widen fissures within the NATO alliance, not condition setting for imminent nuclear use.

**Key inflections in ongoing military operations on October 23:**

- Russian authorities likely cut internet access in Kherson City on October 22 to limit local reporting of Russian evacuations to the east bank of the Dnipro River.<sup>[9]</sup> Russian sources claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian ground attacks in northwestern Kherson Oblast.<sup>[10]</sup>
- Ukrainian and Russian sources reported fighting near Siversk, Soledar, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Marinka in eastern Ukraine.<sup>[11]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian ground attacks in western Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[12]</sup>
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted counteroffensive operations in the direction of Kreminna and Svatove.<sup>[13]</sup>
- Russian forces struck Zaporizhzhia City, Mykolaiv City, and other areas in Mykolaiv Oblast with Shahed 136 drones and S-300 missiles.<sup>[14]</sup> Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces targeted Nikopol and Marhanets with multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) strikes.<sup>[15]</sup>
- A spokesperson for the Ukrainian Air Force Command claimed that Ukrainian forces have shot down a total of 273 Iranian-provided Shahed-136 drones since Russia began using them in Ukraine on September 13.<sup>[16]</sup>
- A Ukrainian government source reported that Iranian instructors in Belarus (in addition to previously reported instructors in Crimea) aided Russian forces in the coordination of previous Shahed-136 drone strikes against Kyiv Oblast and northern and western oblasts in Ukraine.<sup>[17]</sup>
- Russian outlets continued to set conditions to blame Ukraine for the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant, which Russian forces will likely destroy to slow advancing Ukrainian forces<sup>[18]</sup><sup>[19]</sup>

- Russian sources widely discussed the construction of defensive positions in Kursk Oblast.[20]
- A Ukrainian source reported that Russian authorities in Krasnodar Krai have “indefinitely” extended the “vacations” (meaning forced abductions as part of an ethnic cleansing campaign) of children from Enerhodar, Zaporizhia Oblast.[21]
- Russian sources reported that private businesses are offering to train mobilized men on privately owned military and medical equipment in exchange for money.[22] Another Russian fighter aircraft crashed into a two-story building in Novo-Lenino, Irkutsk Oblast.[23]

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 22

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Katherine Lawlor, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, and Mason Clark

October 22, 7 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces continued to withdraw from western Kherson Oblast while preparing to conduct delaying actions that will likely be only partially effective. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces have completely abandoned their positions in Charivne and Chkalove (both approximately 33km northwest of Nova Kakhovka), and Russian officers and medics have reportedly evacuated from Beryslav.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff added that Russian forces are also removing patients from the Kakhovka Hospital on the eastern bank of the Dnipro River, likely to free up hospital beds for Russian military casualties that may result from the withdrawal across the river.[2] The Ukrainian General Staff noted that some Russian elements are preparing Kherson City for urban combat, while other servicemembers continue to flee the city via the ferry operating in the vicinity of the Antonivsky Bridge.[3] The UK Ministry of Defense reported on October 22 that Russian forces completed construction of a barge bridge alongside the damaged bridge and forecasted that the barge bridge would become a critical crossing point for Russian forces as Ukrainian forces advance toward Kherson City.[4] A large part of the Kherson City population has also reportedly left the city.[5]

Russian forces are preparing a series of delaying actions with mixed efficacy. Russian forces are likely preparing to destroy the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP), flooding and widening the Dnipro River to delay any Ukrainian advances.[6] Russian occupation authorities in Nova Kakhovka are likely attempting to moderate the resultant flooding; Nova Kakhovka Occupation head Vladimir Leontyev said on October 22 that Russian authorities are lowering the volume of water from the reservoir behind the dam to minimize damage in case the KHPP is destroyed but stayed true to the false narrative that Ukraine, not Russia, would blow the dam.[7] Ukraine has no interest destroying the dam and every interest in preserving the energy supply in newly-liberated parts of Kherson Oblast. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reiterated that Russian military leadership has moved their officer corps across the river but left newly-mobilized men on the western bank of the Dnipro River as a detachment left in contact.[8] Using such inexperienced forces to conduct a delaying action could prompt a Russian rout if Ukrainian forces choose to press the attack, as ISW previously assessed.[9] One Russian milblogger noted that the situation in Kherson Oblast is dire for Russian troops, noting that it is "virtually impossible" for Russia to evacuate troops from the first lines of defense and that only two questions remain: how to withdraw the final front line of forces, and how to explain the withdrawal to the Russian population.[10]

**Russian occupation authorities ordered the forcible “evacuation” of civilians from Kherson City on October 22.** The Russian Kherson Occupation Administration announced that “all citizens of Kherson must immediately leave the city” and said that all civilians and “all departments and ministries of civil administration must now cross over to the [east] bank of the [Dnipro River].”[11] The occupation administration cited the “tense” situation at the front, “increased danger of massive shelling of the city and the threat of terrorist attacks” and provided instructions for where evacuees can find boats to take them across the river. The occupation administration encouraged evacuees to bring clothes, valuables, and documents, indicating that they do not expect a rapid Russian or civilian return to western Kherson. Russian forces expect to leave the city and are therefore likely trying to depopulate parts of the oblast that

Ukraine will recapture, damaging the long-term social and economic viability of southern Ukraine. Russian authorities are likely also making initial efforts to evacuate at least those civilians who are willing to cooperate with Russian occupation authorities and would otherwise be in the path of flooding resulting from the blown Kakhovka dam.

**Russian forces conducted massive missile and drone attacks to degrade Ukrainian energy infrastructure in nine oblasts on October 22.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 22 that Russian forces launched 40 missile strikes and 16 Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones at Ukrainian infrastructure and that Ukrainian forces shot down 20 Russian cruise missiles and 11 Russian drones.<sup>[12]</sup> Russian strikes hit Ukrainian energy infrastructure in Volyn, Rivne, Kharkiv, Khmelnytskyi, Kirovohrad, Cherkasy, Zaporizhia, Odesa, and Mykolaiv oblasts. Ukrenergo, the Ukrainian state energy company, announced on October 22 that the scale of Russian strikes on October 22 met or exceeded the scale and effect of Russian strikes on October 10-12, which Russian President Vladimir Putin had falsely implied were a discrete response to Ukraine's October 8 attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge.<sup>[13]</sup> Instead, Russian forces are likely attempting to degrade Ukraine's will to fight and to force the Ukrainian government to apply additional resources to protecting civilians and energy infrastructure in lieu of channeling those resources toward Ukraine's counteroffensives in the east and south.

**Ongoing Russian strikes on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure are extraordinarily unlikely to erode the Ukrainian will to fight but will increasingly pose an economic and humanitarian challenge for Ukraine as temperatures drop.** Russian shelling and strikes have damaged approximately 30% of Ukraine's energy infrastructure in recent weeks, prompting rolling blackouts across the country, not just along the front lines.<sup>[14]</sup> Blackouts combined with cold winter weather and damaged civilian buildings will likely increase the suffering of Ukraine's civilian population this winter. Russia's campaign of targeting Ukrainian energy infrastructure is creating a humanitarian tragedy without meaningfully altering the battlefield situation, and Russian excuses for such strikes are wearing increasingly thin. The Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Vasily Nevezny, claimed on October 22 that Russian drones are only hitting civilian targets in Ukraine because Ukrainian defensive fire requires the drones to change course, a bizarre admission of culpability.<sup>[15]</sup>

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin continues to create rifts within the Russian government by publicizing the so-called "Wagner line" of fortifications in northeastern Ukraine, which appears misaligned with Kremlin-led narratives on the course of the war.** Prigozhin and Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels announced that Russian regional officials paused the extension of the Wagner Line fortifications that run behind the line of contact in Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts and into Russia's Belgorod Oblast.<sup>[16]</sup> Prigozhin accused the Russian bureaucracy—which he characterized as "bureaucrat-enemies"—of "directly opposing the interests of the population" and not protecting the Russian population by supporting the construction of the line. The Russian nationalist community has repeatedly accused the Kremlin of failing to defend the Belgorod Oblast border, and Prigozhin may be attempting to amplify their demands. The Kremlin is likely attempting to maintain its limited framing of the war, which will likely continue to upset the nationalist community that is seemingly concerned by the lack of defenses around Belgorod Oblast. Prigozhin and Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels previously indicated that there is an ongoing schism within the Kremlin's power circles between officials that are hesitant to continue the war due to personal interest and those in favor of Russian total victory.<sup>[17]</sup> Russian maps show that Prigozhin's proposed Wagner Line extension would defend the border between Belgorod Oblast and Ukraine's Sumy, Kharkiv, and Luhansk oblasts, but notably would not cover northern Luhansk Oblast up to the line of contact, placing it at odds with Kremlin promises to defend all of Luhansk.<sup>[18]</sup> Other maps show that the Luhansk-Donetsk Wagner Line segment will largely only defend the territory of Luhansk Oblast that Russian proxy forces controlled prior to their February 24 full-scale invasion. The line covers some newly occupied settlements like Lysychansk, Zolote, and Popasna, but excludes Kreminna and Severodonetsk.<sup>[19]</sup> Prigozhin and Wagner commanders are likely preparing to defend the positions they think they can realistically hold, not the present extent of Russian lines or all of the territory the Kremlin claims to have annexed, and are likely not confident in Russia's ability to defend settlements north of Lysychansk such as Kreminna and Svatove.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces continued large-scale strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure. Ongoing strikes are unlikely to erode Ukrainian will to fight but will pose economic and humanitarian challenges throughout the winter.**

- Russian forces continued to withdraw from western Kherson Oblast while preparing for delaying actions that will likely be only partially effective.
- Occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast ordered civilians to evacuate east on October 21. Evacuations from Kherson City will support likely Russian plans to blow up the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Plant (HPP) dam to cover their withdrawal.
- Prigozhin-led efforts to build a “Wagner Line” of defensive fortifications extend through central Luhansk Oblast and in limited capacity into Belgorod.
- Prigozhin’s efforts and messaging, including the creation of the “Wagner Line,” are increasingly out of line with Kremlin rhetoric and are critical of what Prigozhin claims are slow-moving “bureaucrat-enemies.” Such activism endears Prigozhin to Russian nationalists, who are dissatisfied with limited Kremlin escalation and MoD disorganization.
- Russian sources reported Ukrainian counteroffensives in the direction of Kreminna and Svatove on October 22.
- Russian forces conducted limited counterattacks with no confirmed advances to regain lost territory in Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Donetsk oblasts on October 22.
- Crimean occupation authorities banned filming of infrastructure and military logistics likely due to continued Ukrainian strikes targeting Russian supply hubs and lines.
- ISW identified additional reports on October 22 that Russian mobilization has not met force generation goals and will likely continue in alternative forms.
- Russian and occupation administration officials continued to forcibly relocate residents in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine as of October 22.
- Russian and occupation officials continued to restrict the movement of residents living in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine and increase the checkpoint controls as of October 22.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 22, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 21

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan  
October 21, 8:00 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian withdrawal from western Kherson Oblast has begun. Russian forces likely intend to continue that withdrawal over the next several weeks but may struggle to withdraw in good order if Ukrainian forces choose to attack. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command stated on October 21 that Russian forces are "quite actively" transferring ammunition, military equipment, and some unspecified units from the Dnipro River's west bank to the east bank via ferries.<sup>[1]</sup> The Southern Operational Command added that Russian forces deployed 2,000 mobilized men to hold the frontlines and are continuing to shell Ukrainian positions, likely in an effort to cover their withdrawal.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian military officials reported that the Russian occupation administration is preparing the evacuation of imported Russian specialists, Ukrainian collaborators, and Kherson's banking system.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian occupation administration in Beryslav and humanitarian facilities in Kherson City also reportedly ceased operations.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Russian withdrawal from western Kherson requires that a Russian detachment left in contact hold the line against Ukrainian attack, covering other Russian forces as they withdraw. Such a detachment must be well-trained, professional, and prepared to die for its compatriots to effectively perform that duty. The deputy chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, assessed on October 20 that that Russian military leadership may withdraw "the most combat-capable units" from the west bank part of the region to the east bank of the Dnipro River and leave mobilized soldiers in contact to cover the withdrawal.<sup>[5]</sup> Russian milbloggers seized on Hromov's assessment on October 21 and claimed that Ukrainian officials falsely said that elite units like the VDV and marines are being replaced by untrained mobilized men in Kherson.<sup>[6]</sup> If Hromov's assessment is correct, then Russian forces would be setting conditions for a Russian withdrawal to become a rout. Russia's poorly trained, newly mobilized reservists are very unlikely to stand and resist a Ukrainian counterattack if Ukrainian forces chose to attack them and chase the withdrawing forces. The collapse of a mobilized reservist detachment left in contact would likely lead to a Ukrainian rout of Russian forces on the same scale as Ukraine's rout of Russian forces in Kharkiv.

Russian officials have remained cagey about whether or not Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered a withdrawal from Kherson and are likely continuing to prepare the information space for such a collapse, as ISW has previously assessed.<sup>[7]</sup> Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov dodged a direct question from reporters addressing the likely withdrawal and directed reporters to the Ministry of Defense on October 21.<sup>[8]</sup> One Russian milblogger noted on October 21 that Russian forces "will receive bad news from Kherson Oblast" in the coming week and that "November will be very, very hard."<sup>[9]</sup> A Russian war correspondent told Russian state-controlled television on October 19 that Ukrainian forces outnumber Russian forces by four to one and that "there will be no good news in the next two months, that's for sure ... severe territorial losses are likely in these two months, but defeat in one battle does not mean losing the war."<sup>[10]</sup>

**Russian forces will likely attempt to blow up the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) to cover their withdrawal and to prevent Ukrainian forces from pursuing Russian forces deeper into Kherson Oblast.** Russian forces will almost certainly blame Ukraine for the dam attack, as ISW has previously assessed.<sup>[11]</sup> Ukraine has no material interest in blowing the dam, which could flood 80 Ukrainian cities and displace hundreds of thousands of people while damaging Ukraine's already-tenuous electricity supply. Russia, however, has every reason to attempt to provide cover to its retreating forces and to widen the Dnipro River, which Ukrainian forces would need to cross to continue their counteroffensive. Any claims that Russian forces would not blow the dam due to concerns for the water supply to Crimea are absurd. Crimea survived without access to the canal flowing from the Dnipro since Russia illegally invaded and annexed it in 2014 through the restoration of access following Russia's invasion in February 2022. Russian officials have demonstrated their ability to indefinitely supply Crimea with water without access to the canal. Russian forces will try to hold eastern Kherson Oblast not for the water, but rather to provide a buffer zone that enables the defense of Crimea and prevents Ukrainian forces from getting into artillery range of the peninsula. Russian decisionmakers may believe that blowing the dam will enable them to retain that buffer zone. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky warned on October 21 that blowing the dam could cut water supplies to much of southern Ukraine and would pose a

serious risk to the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP), which lies upstream of the dam.[12] The ZNPP relies on water from the Kakhovka reservoir to cool its facilities.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin is setting conditions for Russia to continue a protracted high-intensity conventional war in Ukraine, not a negotiated settlement or off-ramp.** The information conditions that the Kremlin has set to enable the Kherson withdrawal, the preparations to blow the dam, and the preparations for additional mobilization and conscription all demonstrate that Putin is not seeking offramps in the near term. Instead, he is setting conditions for improved Russian combat capability over the winter and well into 2023. Putin signed a decree on October 21 creating a Russian government "coordination council" to "strengthen coordination of federal executive branch organs and the federal subjects' executive branch organs" during the war in Ukraine.[13] The council's responsibilities include coordinating federal and regional authorities to meet the needs of the Russian military; resolving military supply issues, forming plans to supply the military; defining the volume and direction of the Russian state budget to support the military; and creating working groups on select issues, among other things.[14] Putin's creation of the coordination council is a continuation of Putin's October 19 declaration of martial law readiness standards, which the Kremlin seeks to use to expand Russian government authorities as way of further transiting Russia to a wartime footing.[15] A prominent Russian milblogger stated that the creation of this council is overdue and that its creation in spring 2022 would have prevented Russia's logistics and supply problems from becoming so acute.[16] This milblogger stated that Putin's creation of the council was a "step in the right direction" nonetheless.[17] It is a step that Putin need not take if he were seeking to wrap the war up soon or were looking for some sort of off-ramp or pause that he expected to end major combat operations. The creation of this new coordinating body instead sets conditions for a high level of mobilization of the Russian state, economy, and society for continued high-intensity conventional military operations for the foreseeable future. **Putin continues to show his willingness to pay a high price in domestic discontent to pursue a military resolution of the war he initiated on his terms, showing through his actions a marked disinterest in any serious concessions or ceasefire negotiations that could lead to sustainable peace.**

#### Key Takeaways

- The Russian withdrawal from western Kherson Oblast has begun. Russian forces likely intend to continue that withdrawal over the next several weeks but may struggle to withdraw in good order if Ukrainian forces choose to attack.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is demonstrably setting conditions for Russia to continue a protracted war in Ukraine, not for a negotiated settlement or offramp.
- Russian forces will likely attempt to blow up the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) to cover their withdrawal from Kherson City and to prevent Ukrainian forces from pursuing Russian forces deeper into Kherson Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on October 21 creating a Russian government "coordination council" to improve wartime federal coordination.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported fighting northeast of Kharkiv City along the international border, on the Svatove-Kremenna frontline, and west of Lysychansk.
- Ukrainian military officials offered a limited overview of the situation on the frontline.
- Ukraine's Southern Operational Command emphasized that Russian forces are using Ukrainian civilians as human shields when transporting military equipment across the Dnipro River, while Russian sources released footage showing a line of civilians awaiting the ferry from Kherson City.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast and routine fire west of Hulyaipole and in Mykolaiv Oblast.
- Russian authorities are attempting to maintain the façade of sustainable and strong logistics in southern Ukraine while accelerating measures to compensate for the Kerch Strait Bridge attack.
- Fissures between regional Russian officials, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and military commissariats, and the Russian civilian population from which mobilization draws will likely intensify in the coming months.

- Russian authorities are preventing Ukrainians in Russia from leaving Russia with complex residency and permit requirements to cross international borders.
- Russian occupation authorities continued the mass forced removal of civilians from the west bank of the Dnipro River under the guise of civilian “evacuations.”

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Nicholas Carl, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 20, 7:00pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russia is likely continuing to prepare for a false flag attack on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP).** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on October 20 that Russian forces mined the dam of the Kakhovka HPP and noted that the HPP holds over 18 million cubic meters of water, which would cause massive and rapid flooding of settlements along the Dnipro River, including Kherson City.[1] Zelensky emphasized that the flooding would impact hundreds of thousands of people.[2] Russian sources, however, continued to accuse Ukrainian forces of shelling the Kakhovka HPP and have widely circulated graphics depicting the flood path in the event of a dam breach.[3] As ISW reported on October 19, Russian sources are likely setting information conditions for Russian forces to blow the dam after they withdraw from western Kherson Oblast and accuse Ukrainian forces of flooding the Dnipro River and surrounding settlements, partially in an attempt to cover their retreat further into eastern Kherson Oblast.[4] Continued Russian preparation for a false-flag attack on the Kakhovka HPP is also likely meant to distract from reports of Russian losses in Kherson Oblast.

**Russian forces are likely setting conditions to remove military and occupation elements from the west bank of the Dnipro River in anticipation of imminent Ukrainian advances.** Kherson City

Telegram accounts claimed on October 20 that Russian forces disbanded and looted a fire station in Kherson City and ferried fire trucks, stolen civilian cars, and other miscellaneous household items across the Dnipro River to Hola Prystan.[5] ISW cannot independently confirm those reports. The Ukrainian service of *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty* also reported on October 20 that Russian forces are moving military equipment from the west bank to the east bank of the Dnipro River in the face of recent Ukrainian advances, and posted satellite imagery that shows a Russian cargo ferry traveling across the Dnipro River from Kozatske (west bank) to Nova Kakhovka (east bank).[6] *Radio Liberty* noted that the ferry is fully loaded when it arrives at Nova Kakhovka and empty when it returns to Kozatske and suggested that this movement has been ongoing since early October.[7] Taken in tandem, these reports indicate that Russian troops are likely deliberately removing large amounts of personnel and equipment from the west bank of the Dnipro River. Russian forces have likely learned, at least in part, from their failures during the panicked Russian retreat from Kharkiv Oblast in the face of a previous Ukrainian counteroffensive. The militarily sensible thing would be to remove men and equipment in good order to avoid another devastating rout. Such a rout in Kherson could trap Russian forces and equipment on the west bank of the Dnipro River.

**The White House confirmed on October 20 that Iranian military personnel are in Russian-occupied Crimea, Ukraine, to assist Russian forces in conducting drone attacks on Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure.** US National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby told reporters that “a relatively small number” of Iranian personnel are in Crimea to train Russian personnel in the use of unfamiliar Iranian-made drones.[8] Kirby emphasized that “Tehran is now directly engaged on the ground and through the provision of weapons that are impacting civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, that are killing civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure in Ukraine” and warned that Russia and Iran will continue to lie about their partnership. Russian officials have continued to deny their purchase of Iranian drones, but the existence of the deal is increasingly common knowledge even within Russia. A member of the Russian Ministry of Defense Public Council, Ruslan Pukhov, believed he was not being recorded when he told a Russian television host live on air on October 20 that “we won’t rock the boat too much, so I ask you not to [focus] too much on those Iranian [drones], like that classic story: ‘you have an ass but no word for it.’ We all know that they’re Iranian, but the authorities are not admitting

that.”[9] Iranian officials have also denied the sales despite the widespread Russian use of Iranian drones in Ukraine since mid-September, but Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei boasted on October 19 that “a few years ago, when pictures of [Iran’s] advanced missiles & drones were published, they said they’re photoshopped pictures! Now they say Iranian drones are dangerous [and ask] why do you sell them to so & so?”[10]

**Iran is providing military support to Russian forces in Ukraine despite new international sanctions likely in part because Iranian leaders believe that they need Moscow’s help to upend the US-led global order.** The European Union imposed additional sanctions on Iranian officials and the manufacturer of the Shahed-136 drones that Iran has sold to Russia for use in Ukraine on October 20.[11] Senior Iranian officials and state media frequently argue that Tehran must expand strategic relations with Russia and China to cooperate toward countering US global influence.[12] Iranian leaders may worry that a Russian failure in Ukraine would seriously disrupt this vision and possibly threaten Vladimir Putin’s hold on power and, therefore, Iran’s security. Iran could further expand its military support to Russia in the coming months.

**The risk of a Russian offensive from Belarus into northern Ukraine remains low despite a prominent Ukrainian official’s October 20 warning that the risk of a Russian offensive from Belarus is “growing.”** The deputy chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, stated that the risk of a renewed offensive from Russian forces against northern Ukraine is growing.[13] Hromov stated that Russian forces may attack northwest Ukraine to disrupt Ukrainian supply lines from Western partner countries. Such a course of action remains unlikely in the coming months given that Russian forces lack the capability even to interdict Ukrainian supply lines from the west with a ground offensive. The nearest Ukrainian east-west rail line is 30 km from the Belarusian border, and the Pripet Marshes in northern Ukraine and Belarus make maneuver warfare across the international border in Volyn and Rivne oblasts exceptionally difficult. Ukraine’s road and rail network has sufficient nodes with Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary that a Russian incursion from Belarus could not seriously degrade Ukrainian logistical lines without projecting deeper into Ukraine than Russians did during the Battle of Kyiv, when Russian forces were at their strongest. Those forces are now significantly degraded. A Russian milblogger reiterated on October 20 that the Russian force group in Belarus is too small to threaten Kyiv.[14] White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby reiterated on October 20 that Belarus may concentrate manpower on the border to fix Ukrainian forces in northern Ukraine and prevent their deployment to the active area of operation in southern and eastern Ukraine, as ISW has assessed.[15]

### **Key Takeaways**

- Russia is likely continuing to prepare for a false-flag attack on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP).
- Russian forces are likely setting conditions to remove military and occupation elements from the west bank of the Dnipro River in anticipation of imminent Ukrainian advances.
- The White House confirmed on October 20 that Iranian military personnel are in Russian-occupied Crimea, Ukraine to assist Russian forces in conducting drone attacks on Ukrainian civilians and civilian infrastructure.
- Iran is providing military support to Russian forces in Ukraine despite new international sanctions likely in part because Iranian leaders believe that they need Moscow’s help to upend the US-led global order.
- Iran is providing military support to Russian forces in Ukraine despite new international sanctions likely in part because Iranian leaders believe that they need Moscow’s help to upend the US-led global order.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Russian forces are consolidating limited regained positions in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast on October 20 despite Ukrainian reports that Ukraine has liberated all but 1.8% of Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian sources indicated that Ukrainian troops have advanced in northern Kherson Oblast as Ukrainian forces continued their interdiction campaign.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground assaults in Donetsk Oblast but Russian sources contradicted their own claims on control of Bakhmut. Russian forces are likely continuing to

- falsify claims of advances in the Bakhmut area to portray themselves as making gains in at least one sector amid continuing losses in northeast and southern Ukraine.
- Russian regional governments and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) continue to blame each other for military administrative failures.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 19, 8:00 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian authorities are likely setting information conditions to justify planned Russian retreats and significant territorial losses in Kherson Oblast.** Commander of Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergey Surovikin reported during an appearance on Russian television that the Russian military leadership has to make "difficult decisions" regarding Kherson Oblast and accused Ukraine of planning to strike civilian and residential infrastructure in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[1]</sup> Kherson Occupation Head Vladimir Saldo relatedly noted that his administration is evacuating the west bank of the Dnipro River in anticipation of a "large-scale" Ukrainian offensive.<sup>[2]</sup> Surovikin's and Saldo's statements are likely attempts to set information conditions for a full Russian retreat across the Dnipro River, which would cede Kherson City and other significant territory in Kherson Oblast to advancing Ukrainian troops. Russian military leaders have evidently learned from previous informational and operational failures during the recent Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast and are therefore likely attempting to mitigate the informational and operational consequences of failing to defend against another successful Ukrainian advance.

**Russian forces are also setting information conditions to conduct a false-flag attack on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP). The Russian military may believe that breaching the dam could cover their retreat from the right bank of the Dnipro River and prevent or delay Ukrainian advances across the river.** Surovikin claimed on October 18 that he has received information that Kyiv intends to strike the dam at the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP), which he alleged would cause destructive flooding in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[3]</sup> Saldo echoed this claim and warned that Ukrainian forces intend to strike dams upstream of Kherson City.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian authorities likely intend these warnings about a purported Ukrainian strike on the Kakhovka HPP to set information conditions for Russian forces to damage the dam and blame Ukraine for the subsequent damage and loss of life, all while using the resulting floods to cover their own retreat further south into Kherson Oblast. The Kremlin could attempt to leverage such a false-flag attack to overshadow the news of a third humiliating retreat for Russian forces, this time from western Kherson. Such an attack would also further the false Russian information operation portraying Ukraine as a terrorist state that deliberately targets civilians.

**Russia continues to use the guise of civilian "evacuations" as a cover for the mass forced removal of civilians from Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.** Saldo's announcement of a mass withdrawal from the west bank of the Dnipro River is likely intended in part to evacuate Russian occupation officials, collaborators, and other occupation organs in anticipation of imminent Ukrainian advances, but Russian officials are likely also using the façade of humanitarian necessity to deport large populations of Ukrainians to Russia, as ISW has previously reported. Russia does not appear to reap any economic benefits from resettling tens of thousands of unwilling Ukrainians in Russia, suggesting that the purpose of such removals is both to damage Ukraine's long-term economic recovery as it retakes its territory and, more importantly, to support Russia's ethnic cleansing campaign, which is attempting to eradicate the Ukrainian ethnicity and culture.<sup>[5]</sup> The Russians may also intend to press "evacuated" Ukrainians into their armed forces, offsetting the losses and failures of the partial mobilization.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's October 19 declaration of martial law readiness is largely legal theater meant to legitimize activities the Russian military needs to undertake or is already undertaking while creating a framework for future mobilization and domestic restrictions.**<sup>[6]</sup> Putin declared varying levels of "martial law readiness" across Russia and in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories. These declarations outline four levels of readiness, ranging from "maximum" (full-scale martial

law in Russian-occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts) to “basic” (across all of Russia).[7]



Putin did not formally declare martial law outside of Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts, but instead directed areas outside Ukraine to build out the legal framework necessary to support Russian mobilization.[8] Putin’s speech framed the declaration of martial law in four Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine as a continuation of the wartime status quo, adjusted to Russian legal frameworks after Russia’s illegal annexation of those territories.[9] Putin’s decree did not spell out immediate next steps under martial law or elevated readiness levels but granted sweeping emergency powers to regional governors and gave local authorities until October 22 to develop and submit specific proposals for those next steps. Additional information will become apparent as regional governors and law enforcement submit and implement those proposals, which will likely be directed at least in part by the Kremlin but laundered through local authorities. Putin also left himself a path to expand his declarations of martial law, noting that “If necessary, in the Russian Federation during the period of martial law, other measures provided for by the [federal law covering martial law] may be applied.”[10] That language leaves open the door for future declarations and expansions of government authorities.

**Putin’s decrees identified several sectors in which the Russian state will be exerting increasing control:**

- In areas of maximum and medium readiness, the decree calls for unspecified “mobilization measures in the economic sphere,” likely to provide economic and industrial support to Putin’s so-called “partial” mobilization of at least 300,000 Russian men.
- In all areas, the decree makes provisions for government control of transportation and communications infrastructure as well as increased security around government buildings and other critical infrastructure.
- In areas of maximum application of martial law (Russia-occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk), the decree calls for the establishment of “territorial defense” headquarters with unspecified roles.
- In areas of medium and elevated readiness, the decree enables regional leaders to take measures for territorial defense and civil defense.

- In areas of medium readiness, the decree enables governments to forcibly “temporarily resettle” civilians.
- The decree also includes vague language for each category, authorizing local authorities to “implement measures to meet the needs of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, other troops, military formations, bodies and needs of the population.” Such language could be used to legalize almost any government action.
- In areas of elevated, medium, and maximum readiness, the decree allows for restricting movements of people and vehicles. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Yevgeny Ivanov claimed on October 19 that the government does not currently intend to restrict movement out of the country.[11] However, Putin’s decree would likely provide legal cover for the implementation of such restrictions without passing additional decrees.

**These moves closer to full-scale martial law are unsurprising but disordered—a competent modern military should implement economic mobilization, secure lines of transportation, and coordinate territorial defense before or as initial mobilization for war begins, not as follow-on reserve mobilization nears its completion** (Putin announced on October 14 that his “partial” mobilization would end by early November).[12] These moves are likely necessary to fulfill basic military requirements, such as feeding, housing, equipping, and transporting mobilized and conscripted troops to the front lines; forcing defense contractors or other private businesses to align with government production requirements; and more easily controlling both the Russian population and the Ukrainian civilian populations in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine.

**Putin has slow-rolled his introduction of legal concepts and frameworks like military and economic mobilization, annexation, and martial law to the Russian population since September, attempting to normalize these concepts and limit domestic dissent.** Putin likely understands that these measures are unpopular but may be counting on an upswell of fatalistic patriotism as more Russian families and businesses become tied to, and implicated in, the war in Ukraine. By gradually introducing additional measures, he likely also intends to work out likely unsolvable bureaucratic flaws in the Russian system, creating a more competent bureaucracy to implement the autumn conscription cycle (beginning November 1) as well as likely future waves of mobilization.

**Putin also may be setting conditions for a less orthodox kind of under-the-radar mobilization: the creation of Ukrainian-style Territorial Defense Forces.** Putin ordered local authorities to create a “territorial defense headquarters” in the four occupied Ukrainian oblasts and empowered local governors to undertake unspecified “territorial defense activities” in medium and elevated readiness areas (largely territories that border or are near Ukraine). This preparation likely serves at least two purposes: creating a legal framework for the forcible mobilization of Ukrainian civilians in Russian-occupied territories, as ISW has forecasted, and at least experimenting with a new kind of Russian military force.[13] Ukraine’s Territorial Defense Forces played a critical role in the defense of Kyiv and the recapture of other key Ukrainian cities. Ukraine’s Territorial Defense Forces are composed of a core of veterans and part-time reservists, largely officers, but can be built out by civilian volunteers in wartime who are then led by the officer corps.

**Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may also be driving Putin toward unconventional methods of continuing the war.** Prigozhin announced on October 19 that he sent senior Wagner commander Andrey Bogatov to Belgorod Oblast within the last two weeks to “create a people’s militia.” Prigozhin claimed that Wagner instructors will teach this “people’s militia” to “defend the borders of the oblast.”[14] The term he used for “people’s militia” (*narodnoe opolcheniye*) has a long history in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union but is essentially an irregular and untrained force that fights behind the frontlines or beside a conventional army. Prigozhin may be attempting to draw upon the historical notion of a people’s militia fighting a great patriotic war to reinvigorate Russian enthusiasm for the invasion of Ukraine, a notion that may appeal to the historically-minded Putin. However, Prigozhin’s proposed Belgorod People’s Militia is not apparently similar to the more structured Territorial Defense Forces and uses different language, suggesting at least rhetorical tension between the Kremlin’s and Prigozhin’s visions.

**Prigozhin is also continuing efforts to set himself and Wagner Group forces apart from conventional Russian military elements.** The Russian outlet RIA claimed that Wagner engineering units are actively building a fortified “Wagner Line” that runs adjacent to territories in Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts.[15] Prigozhin reportedly stated that the construction of the “Wagner Line” is meant to protect other elements of the Russian Armed Forces while Wagner units capture more territory in Donetsk Oblast.[16] Prigozhin’s statements indicate that he is likely continuing to promote Wagner units as

superior to conventional Russian Armed Forces in a bid to increase his influence among Kremlin officials. Russian outlet RIA published a supposed map of the “Wagner line” that suggests that Prigozhin and Wagner forces may expect the Russian military to lose considerable territory in Luhansk Oblast, putting Prigozhin’s publicity of the line at odds with the specious Kremlin narrative that Russia will hold all of Luhansk Oblast.[17]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian authorities are likely setting information conditions to justify planned Russian retreats and the loss of significant territory in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces are setting information conditions to conduct a false-flag attack on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP); the Russian military may believe that breaching the dam could cover their retreat from the right bank of the Dnipro River and prevent or delay Ukrainian advances across the river.
- Russia continues to use the guise of civilian “evacuations” as a cover for the mass forced removal of civilians from Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin’s October 19 declaration of martial law readiness is largely legal theater meant to legitimize activities the Russian military needs to undertake or is already undertaking while creating a framework for future mobilization and domestic restrictions.
- Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is continuing efforts to set himself and Wagner Group forces apart from conventional Russian military elements.
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited assaults to recapture lost territory in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly continued to conduct assaults in the Kreminna-Svatove area.
- Russian sources widely claimed that Ukrainian troops conducted another offensive push in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin passed a decree on October 19 seeking to address Russian military personnel’s ongoing concerns about timely payments and setting the blame on Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Finance Minister Anton Siluanov for future payment issues.
- The Russian parliament proposed legal measures that would allow Russian authorities to minimize the domestic impacts of partial mobilization in potential future mobilization waves.
- Russian military officials continued to forcibly mobilize Ukrainian residents of Russian-occupied territories to labor or fight on behalf of the Russian military.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 18

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Mason Clark

October 18, 8:30pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces continued to target critical Ukrainian civilian infrastructure with air, missile, and drone strikes on October 18. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched 19 missile strikes and 68 air strikes against over 10 areas, including Kyiv, Zhytomyr City, Kharkiv City, Dnipro City, Kryvyi Rih, Zaporizhzhia City, Mykolaiv City, Odesa City, and other areas in Donetsk, Kherson, and Mykolaiv Oblasts.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces targeted unspecified areas with 43 kamikaze drones, 38 of which Ukrainian forces shot down.[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces continued to strike Ukrainian infrastructure and military command facilities.[3] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on October 18 that Russian strikes between October 10 and October 18 destroyed 30% of Ukrainian power stations in a likely attempt to demoralize Ukrainian civilians that is unlikely to succeed.[4]

**Current and former US officials confirmed to the New York Times on October 18 that members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) are in Russian-occupied Crimea to train Russian forces on how to use the Iranian drones they purchased, thereby enabling likely Russian war crimes.**<sup>[5]</sup> ISW had assessed on October 12 that any Iranian personnel in Ukraine were likely IRGC drone trainers.<sup>[6]</sup> The New York Times reported that it remains unclear whether Iranian trainers are flying the drones themselves, or merely teaching Russian forces how to do so. Russian forces have directed dozens of Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones against civilian targets in Ukraine since mid-September, prioritizing creating psychological terror effects on Ukrainian civilians rather than achieving tangible battlefield effects.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's unequal implementation of partial mobilization is causing social fractures that are driving the Russian information space to further marginalize ethnic minority communities.** As ISW has previously reported, an October 15 shooting at a Belgorod Oblast training ground was likely a natural consequence of the Kremlin's continued policy of using poor and minority communities to bear the brunt of force generation efforts while protecting ethnic Russians and wealthier Russian citizens.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian sources blamed that shooting on two ethnically Tajik Russian citizens who had been forcibly mobilized.<sup>[8]</sup> The Russian information space has largely responded with virulently xenophobic rhetoric against Central Asian migrants and other peripheral social groups. "A Just Russia" Party Chairperson Sergey Mironov posted a long, xenophobic critique of Russia's migration policy on October 18, claiming that mobilization exposed systemic fractures within the Russian immigration system.<sup>[9]</sup> Mironov blamed military commissars for allowing people who pose a threat to Russian security into the Russian Armed Forces and accused military commissariats of keeping their doors wide open for individuals from Central Asia. Mironov proposed a moratorium on granting Russian citizenship to citizens of Tajikistan.<sup>[10]</sup> Mironov's calls for immigration reform demonstrate the role that partial mobilization has seemingly played in catalyzing ethnic divisions, racism, and xenophobia in the Russian domestic space, especially against ethnic minorities.

**Belarus continues to provide its territory and airspace to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine but remains highly unlikely to enter the war on Russia's behalf.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 18 that Belarus continues to allow Russia to use Belarusian military infrastructure and airspace to launch missile, air, and Shahed-136 drone attacks on Ukraine.<sup>[11]</sup> Geolocated social media footage shows Russian military hardware moving through Belarus by rail, which is consistent with ISW's previous assessments that Belarus will continue to engage in the war as a co-belligerent without Belarusian forces directly participating in combat operations.<sup>[12]</sup> The Russian Armed Forces are almost certainly too degraded to reopen a northern front against Ukraine from Belarusian territory in the coming months. The Ukrainian General Staff also noted that Belarusian Armed Forces are conducting covert mobilization under the guise of training sessions, although mobilization in Belarus is likely an attempt by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to demonstrate his support to Putin rather than a tangible indicator of Belarusian military involvement in Ukraine.<sup>[13]</sup>

**Russian troops conducted a limited ground attack in northern Kharkiv Oblast on October 18, seemingly suggesting that Russian forces may retain territorial aspirations in Kharkiv Oblast despite massive losses during recent Ukrainian counteroffensives.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled a Russian attack on Ohirtseve, a settlement 2km south of the international border and about 50km northeast of Kharkiv City.<sup>[14]</sup> The nature of this limited incursion is unclear, but it may suggest that Russian troops are continuing offensive operations near the border. Considering the current, constantly degrading state of Russian offensive capabilities in Ukraine, Russian troops are very unlikely to make any gains in this area.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces continued to target critical Ukrainian civilian infrastructure with air, missile, and drone strikes.**
- **Russian troops conducted a limited ground attack in northern Kharkiv Oblast, seemingly suggesting that Russian forces may retain territorial aspirations in Kharkiv Oblast despite massive losses during recent Ukrainian counteroffensives.**
- **Current and former US officials confirmed that members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) are in Russian-occupied Crimea to train Russian forces on how to use the Iranian drones they purchased, thereby enabling likely Russian war crimes.**
- **Belarus continues to provide its territory and airspace to support the Russian invasion of Ukraine but remains highly unlikely to enter the war on Russia's behalf.**

- Russian sources claimed that Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast to regain lost positions.
- Russian sources stated that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations across the entire frontline in Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) and ammunition depots in central Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Russian authorities are struggling to cope with their reduced logistics capacity through Crimea following the attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge.
- Russian occupation authorities kidnapped Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) personnel, likely to strengthen physical control over the ZNPP's operations.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) confirmed that mobilization ended on October 17 in Moscow Oblast, and Russian civilians continue to express their dissatisfaction with Russian mobilization.
- Russian occupation officials are attempting to incentivize Ukrainian citizens under Russian control in northern Kherson Oblast to flee to Russia as Ukrainian forces advance, and occupation authorities may increasingly force Ukrainian civilians to relocate further behind the frontlines or to Russia in the coming days.

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 18, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 17, 8:30pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes against residential areas and critical infrastructure throughout Ukraine on October 17.** Russian troops struck Kyiv, Zaporizhzhia City, and areas in Vinnytsia, Sumy, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv Oblasts and launched nine missile strikes and 39 air strikes on October 17.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian Air Force spokesperson Yuriy Ignat noted that Russian forces launched 43 drones from southern Ukraine, 37 of which Ukrainian troops destroyed and the majority of which were Iranian Shahed-136 drones.<sup>[2]</sup> Five Shahed-136 drones struck infrastructure in the Shevchenkivskyi district of Kyiv, including the UkrEnergo (Ukrainian electricity transmission system operator) building.<sup>[3]</sup>

**The October 17 drone attack on residential infrastructure in Kyiv is consistent with the broader pattern of Russian forces prioritizing creating psychological terror effects on Ukraine over achieving tangible battlefield effects.** US military analyst Brett Friedman observed on October 17 that a Shahed-136's payload is 88 pounds of explosives, whereas a typical 155mm M795 artillery round carries 23.8 pounds of explosives, which means that one Shahed-136 drone carries about three shells worth of explosive material but without the consistent pattern of fragmentation.<sup>[4]</sup> Friedman suggested that the five Shahed-136s that struck Kyiv had the effect of 15 artillery shells fired at a very large area.<sup>[5]</sup> Such strikes can do great damage to civilian infrastructure and kill and wound many people without creating meaningful military effects. This analysis suggests that Russian forces are continuing to use Shahed-136 drones to generate the psychological effects associated with targeting civilian areas instead of attempting to generate asymmetric operational effects by striking legitimate military and frontline targets in a concentrated manner.<sup>[6]</sup>

**A fratricidal altercation between mobilized servicemen at a training ground in Belgorod Oblast on October 15 is likely a consequence of the Kremlin's continual reliance on ethnic minority communities to bear the burden of mobilization in the Russian Federation.** Russian sources reported that the shooting took place after mobilized servicemen from Dagestan, Azerbaijan, and Adygea complained to their commander that the war in Ukraine is not their war to fight, to which the commander responded that they are fighting a "holy war" and called Allah a "coward," causing a fight to break out between Muslim and non-Muslim servicemen.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian sources then claimed that three mobilized Tajik servicemen opened fire at the training ground, killing the commander and both contract and mobilized soldiers.<sup>[8]</sup> Eyewitnesses claimed that the shooters told Muslim servicemen to stand aside as they opened fire.<sup>[9]</sup> The Russian information space immediately responded to the incident with racialized rhetoric against Central Asians and called for the introduction of a visa regime in Russia.<sup>[10]</sup> Much of the Kremlin's campaign to avoid general mobilization has fallen along distinct ethnic lines, and ethnic minority enclaves have largely borne the brunt of Russian President Vladimir Putin's force generation efforts.<sup>[11]</sup> ISW previously reported on the prevalence of volunteer battalions formed in non-Russian ethnic minority communities, many of which suffered substantial losses upon deployment to Ukraine.<sup>[12]</sup> This trend continued following Putin's announcement of partial mobilization, after which authorities continued to deliberately target minority communities to fulfill mobilization orders.<sup>[13]</sup> ISW also previously noted that the asymmetric distribution of mobilization responsibilities along ethnic lines led to the creation of localized and ethnically based resistance movements, which ISW forecasted could cause domestic ramifications as the war continues.<sup>[14]</sup> The Belgorod shooting is likely a manifestation of exactly such domestic ramifications. Ethnic minorities that have been targeted and forced into fighting a war defined by Russian imperial goals and shaped by Russian Orthodox nationalism will likely continue to feel alienation, which will create feed-back loops of discontent leading to resistance followed by crackdowns on minority enclaves.

**Wagner Group financier Yevheny Prigozhin and Wagner-affiliated social media outlets are increasingly commenting on the ineffectiveness of traditional Russian military institutions and societal issues, which may indirectly undermine the Kremlin's rule.** Prigozhin reiterated that only Wagner troops are operating in the Bakhmut direction, seemingly denying the Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) claims DNR forces are operating in the area.<sup>[15]</sup> Prigozhin also emphasized that he fully sponsors all of the equipment for his troops when responding to a question about whether the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) assists Wagner with supplies. Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels published footage in which elements of the 126th Separate Guards Coastal Defense Brigade of the Black Sea Fleet thanked Wagner for providing them with military equipment.<sup>[16]</sup> ISW had previously reported that the 126th Coastal Defense Brigade issued a video appeal regarding its lack of military equipment on the Kherson frontline.<sup>[17]</sup> Prigozhin additionally offered a realistic portrayal of the situation in Bakhmut, noting that Ukrainians are unwilling to surrender. Wagner-affiliated Telegram channels commented on the

Belgorod training ground shooting incident, noting that a “quiet civil war” is currently ongoing in Russia due to the Russian government’s long-term inability to restrict migration presumably from Central Asian countries.[18]

Prigozhin’s narratives have the ingredients to appeal to the Russian President Vladimir Putin’s nationalist constituency that has long called for oligarchs to finance supplies for the armed forces, demanded transparency about what is really going on at the front, and criticized Russian higher military institutions for their failures on the frontlines. While Prigozhin does not directly oppose or criticize Putin, his growing notoriety within the nationalist community may undermine Putin’s “strongman” appeal by comparison. The emerging discussions about a civil war in Russia may further disrupt the Kremlin’s narratives about the national, ethnic, and religious unity within Russia.

**Russia is continuing to leverage its relationship with Iran to obtain drones and missiles, likely to compensate for its increasingly attrited missile arsenal.** *The Washington Post* reported on October 16 that Iran will likely supply additional missiles, including the Fateh-110 and Zolfaghar short-range ballistic missiles, to Russia in addition to Shahed-136, Mohajer-6, and Arash-2 drones.[19] Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanaani, however, claimed on October 17 that Iran has not provided weapons to “either side,” despite ample reporting by Russian, Iranian, Ukrainian, and Western sources to the contrary.[20] A Russian Telegram channel noted that the recent Russian use of Iranian munitions, particularly the Shahed-136s, is likely reflective of the fact that Russia has nearly exhausted most of its domestic stock of operational-tactical weapons.[21] The channel claimed that Shahed-136s fulfil the role of cruise missiles but allow Russia to circumvent sanctions while maintaining its ability to conduct deep operational strikes.[22]

**A Russian Su-34 crashed near an apartment building in Yeysk, Krasnodar Krai on October 17.** Russian sources claimed that the Su-34 crashed due to an issue with one of its engines.[23] The Su-34 crashed carrying ammunition that detonated on impact causing a fire that engulfed the nearby apartment building.[24] A Russian source claimed that the crash killed one person and seriously injured three others.[25]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces conducted drone and missiles strikes against residential areas and critical infrastructure facilities throughout Ukraine on October 17.
- Russian drone strikes against residential areas in Kyiv on October 17 are indicative of Russian forces prioritizing psychological terror over tangible battlefield gains.
- Yevgeny Prigozhin and affiliated Telegram channels are increasingly commenting on the ineffectiveness of traditional Russian military institutions, which may be undermining the Kremlin.
- A fratricidal altercation between mobilized servicemen at a training ground in Belgorod Oblast on October 15 is likely a consequence of the Kremlin’s continual reliance on ethnic minority communities to bear the burden of mobilization in the Russian Federation.
- Russia is continuing to leverage its relationship with Iran to obtain drones and missiles, likely to compensate for its increasingly attrited missile arsenal.
- A Russian Su-34 crashed near a residential building in Yeysk, Krasnodar Krai on October 17.
- Russian sources continued to discuss potential Ukrainian counteroffensive operations northwest of Svatove on October 16 and 17.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian Forces are conducting counteroffensive operations in Kherson Oblast on October 16 and 17.
- Russian forces conducted ground assaults in Donetsk Oblast on October 16 and 17.
- Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian concentrations of manpower and equipment in Zaporizhia Oblast on October 16 and 17.
- Russian authorities continued measures to exert full control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Moscow City officials announced the completion of partial mobilization in the city on October 17, likely in an effort to subdue criticism among Moscow residents of reports of illegal mobilization in the city.

- Russian and occupation administration officials continue to promote “vacation” programs to residents of Russian-occupied territories likely as pretext for the deportation of Ukrainian citizens and the resettlement of Russian citizens.
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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 16

[Click here to read the full report](#)

This campaign assessment special edition focuses on the specific parts of Ukrainian territory currently under Russian occupation that are important for the long-term viability of an independent Ukraine. Ukrainian forces are currently conducting a counteroffensive push in Kherson Oblast as of October 16. We will update our maps after information about the new front lines unambiguously enters the open-source environment.

**Ukraine must regain certain specific areas currently under Russian occupation to ensure its long-term security and economic viability.** Ukraine's ability to defend itself against a future Russian attack requires liberating most of Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts. Ukraine's economic health requires liberating the rest of Zaporizhia Oblast and much of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, including at least some territory Russia seized in 2014. Ukraine's security would be materially enhanced by liberating Crimea, which would also benefit NATO's ability to secure its southeastern flank.

**Ukraine has every right to fight to liberate all the territory Russia has illegally seized, particularly in light of the continued atrocities and ethnic cleansing Russia is perpetrating in the areas it occupies.** Kyiv's insistence on regaining control of Ukrainian territory to the internationally-recognized borders is not an absolutist or extremist demand—it is the normal position of a state defending itself against an unprovoked attack as part of a war of conquest. It is also the default position of the international community under international law, as it should be. Nothing in the following discussion should be construed as supporting any attempt to encourage, let alone coerce, Ukraine to abandon either its claims or its efforts to free all its land and people.

**However, Ukraine also requires the liberation of the areas mentioned above for purely strategic military and economic reasons.** ISW continues to assess that Putin's intentions toward Ukraine are unlikely to change whether or not a ceasefire or some other settlement occurs. The Kremlin would use any suspension of hostilities to consolidate its gains and freeze the frontline in the best configuration Putin can get to prepare for future coercion and aggression against Ukraine. Those seeking enduring peace in Ukraine must resist the temptation to freeze the lines of combat short of Ukraine's international borders in ways that set conditions for renewed conflict on Russia's terms. The purpose of this brief essay is to consider why specific parts of Ukrainian territory still under Russian occupation are so important for the long-term viability of an independent Ukraine that is not a financial ward of the international community and can effectively defend itself against a renewed Russian invasion.

The Dnipro River is a formidable obstacle for its entire course in Ukraine. Any military would struggle to cross it in the face of prepared defenders. The current Russian lodgment on the west bank in Kherson Oblast is therefore a vital piece of terrain. If a ceasefire or any sort of agreement suspends fighting with the Russians still in possession of that lodgment, the prospects for a renewed Russian offensive in southern Ukraine would be vastly improved. If Ukraine regains control of the entire west bank of the river, on the other hand, the Russians would likely find ground attacks against southwestern Ukraine extraordinarily difficult. The long-term defensibility of Mykolayiv, Odesa, and the entire Ukrainian Black Sea coast thus rests in no small part on the liberation of western Kherson.

Parts of Kherson Oblast on the east bank of the Dnipro are also strategically critical, however. The oblast follows the line of the river to its mouth and then juts out into the Black Sea, coming to within about 40 miles of Odesa. The tip of the Kinburn Spit, the northwesternmost point of this part of Kherson Oblast, is less than 2.5 miles from the city of Ochakiv on the west bank of the Dnipro. Russian military positions in these areas allow Russian forces to bring artillery, drone, and missile fire against much of the Ukrainian Black Sea coast from many short-range systems without having to use expensive longer-range capabilities that will always be in shorter supply. These short distances also make the prospect of amphibious operations far more plausible and easier to support by fire than if the Russians had to conduct them from bases in Crimea. **Ukraine's hold on its entire western Black Sea coast will remain**

**tenuous as long as Russia holds territory in southwestern Kherson much further north than the 2014 lines.**

**Tracing defensible lines requires constantly referring to the roughly 25-kilometer maximum effective range of the 152mm artillery system.** All modern armies have ground-based systems with much longer ranges, to be sure. But 152mm guns are relatively easy and inexpensive to mass produce, as are the rounds they fire. They are also effectively impossible to defend against when used at scale. Systems exist that can shoot down individual artillery rounds (as well as missiles and drones), but not that can shoot down thousands of them at a time. The Russians showed how effective massed bombardments by such weapons can be in their seizures of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, where they pounded Ukrainian troops with artillery and enabled relatively weak Russian ground forces to advance. Planners must assume that Ukrainian positions within 25 kilometers of Russian lines may be subjected to massive artillery barrages from the outset of a renewal of hostilities.

**Sound military doctrine also teaches that one does not attempt to defend a position by standing on it—reliable defenses must be established well forward of the points or lines that must be held.** The Dnipro River should not be Ukraine's first line of defense, but rather its last. Contested river crossings are very difficult but can be made easier if the attacker can make all preparations right at the river, including establishing protected artillery positions, pre-positioning bridging equipment, amassing necessary supplies, and generally laying in all the infrastructure needed to get across a wide river while the defenders fight back. The river is most reliable as a defense if the Russians must first advance to it and then prepare to cross it while Ukrainian defenders disrupt their efforts.

Ukraine must therefore be able to establish and hold positions on the eastern bank of the river. Those positions cannot be in a narrow strip along the river, however. They must be far enough away from the river that a concerted Russian attack cannot easily throw them back against the river itself—a potentially disastrous position for the defender. They must also be far enough east to keep the Russians out of artillery range (about 25 kilometers) of the west bank to prevent the Russians from bombarding Ukrainian defenders on that bank from the outset of a renewed invasion. The 2014 line of contact north of Crimea was close to the limit of how far Russian forces can be allowed to hold ground in the south without beginning to put the Ukrainian defense of the Dnipro and what lies behind it at risk. The distance from the northwesternmost part of those lines to the river at closest approach is about 70 kilometers, which is far enough to allow Ukraine to establish front-line defenses at the line of contact and then a main defensive area out of tube artillery (152mm) range, from which Ukrainian defenders could retreat some distance if necessary while still keeping the Russians out of artillery range of the river and avoiding finding themselves pressed right up against the river.

**Consideration of key terrain in eastern Kherson and western Zaporizhia Oblasts must integrate security and economic concerns because of the location of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) at Enerhodar.** The plant provided a significant proportion of Ukraine's electricity before the 2022 invasion, and its loss would require considerable investment to replace the generating capacity and possibly redesign elements of Ukraine's electrical grid. The liberation of Enerhodar in a way that allows the plant to come back online is therefore central to containing the costs in time and money of the restoration of Ukraine's economy, which is in turn central to allowing Ukraine to avoid becoming an expensive ward of the international community.

Russia's demonstrated irresponsibility toward nuclear facilities in Ukraine also makes restoring the ZNPP to Ukrainian control essential from a security perspective. Russian forces damaged the inactive Chernobyl facilities, kicking up radioactive dust and irradiating themselves in the process. Russian false-flag operations and the use of the ZNPP grounds as a base for conventional military operations show a similarly cavalier attitude toward the dangers of bringing war to a massive nuclear power plant. Allowing Moscow to retain control of the ZNPP puts Ukraine and all Black Sea states at permanent risk of the downstream consequences of Russia's willingness to play with nuclear fire. The Russians must therefore also be kept out of artillery range of Enerhodar. Taking an approach to calculating required positions similar to the one used above would bring the line required to allow Ukrainian forces to reliably defend the ZNPP about 50 kilometers south of Enerhodar in principle. That line would be about 40 kilometers northwest of Melitopol, the next major geographical feature to consider.

Melitopol is a critical junction of roads that run from the Dnipro around the Nova Kakhovka Dam to the Sea of Azov coast and ultimately Mariupol on the one hand and that run from Crimea north to the city of Zaporizhia on the other. If the Russians retain control of Melitopol and the roads running south and east of it, they can and likely will turn it into a major militarized base from which to launch mechanized attacks across the largely flat steppe land to its north and west. Such a base, which could come to be similar to Belgorod, Russia, in the extent of military facilities and capabilities it houses, would be a permanent threat to the ZNPP, Ukrainian positions on the east bank of the Dnipro River, and the major cities of Zaporizhia and Dnipropetrovsk as well. If Ukraine regains control of Melitopol, on the other hand, the Russians would be confined to Crimea and the narrow and vulnerable road and rail connections across the Perekop Isthmus that separates Crimea from the mainland. Defense against such an attack is far easier than would be a defense against an attack that could use Melitopol as a well-stocked and fully prepared forward base.

Further east the weight of consideration becomes more economic. The Donbas—the area of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts divided by the line of control since 2014—had been a single integrated economic unit for centuries. Its mineral deposits were extracted and sent by rail to the port of Mariupol, on the one hand, and to Ukrainian industries in the west on the other. The 2014 Russian seizure of large parts of Donetsk Oblast disrupted this economic activity to Ukraine's detriment. Permanently removing the entire Donbas would do far more serious economic damage to Ukraine. The reconstruction of a viable Ukrainian economy that does not require large amounts of long-term international financial assistance requires restoring the Donbas economic region to Kyiv's control.

The military requirement for that restoration includes the Ukrainian liberation of Mariupol and the road and rail networks north via Volnovakha toward Donetsk City and to the west toward Melitopol and Zaporizhia City. Establishing secure Ukrainian control over Mariupol requires liberating at least some of the land the Russians had seized in 2014. The line of control resulting from that invasion was too close to the city to allow its defenders to avoid encirclement in the face of determined attacks. The same calculations used above regarding 152mm artillery ranges would argue that Ukraine must actually recapture all its land to the internationally recognized border, in fact.

Similar economic arguments hold for the historically industrial cities of Donetsk, Severodonetsk, and Luhansk. In the remaining areas of occupied northeastern Ukraine, the balance of concern shifts primarily to the agricultural sector. Grain plays such a critical part in Ukraine's economy that one could straightforwardly calculate the cost of each lost hectare and consider the requirements to offset that loss over the long term as part of the price of ceding any of this land to Russia.

Northeastern Ukraine does contain some strategically important areas, however. The towns of Svatove, Starobilsk, and Bilovodsk sit on major road junctions, control of which determines in part which bases in Russia proper the Russians can use to support future attacks in Ukraine directly. Russia has major mechanized bases at Valuiki and Boguchar to the northwest and northeast of Luhansk Oblast. Russian forces have been flowing from their bases around Belgorod via Valuiki into northern Luhansk Oblast on the road that runs to Starobilsk and thence westward via Svatove to Kharkiv Oblast. The railway that runs from just north of Luhansk via Starobilsk to the Russian border is particularly important because Russian forces are heavily dependent on rail to move equipment and supplies. The base at Boguchar can also flow forces into Ukraine along a road that runs through Bilovodsk, however. Allowing Russia to retain control of these key junctions and the road and rail networks on which they sit would give Moscow a significant advantage in building up for a renewed invasion from the northeast.

**The Crimean Peninsula, finally, is strategically important for NATO as well as Ukraine.** Russian possession of the peninsula allows Russia to base anti-air and anti-shipping missiles 325 kilometers further west than it could using only the territory it legally controls. It lets Russia position aircraft in Sevastopol, about 300 kilometers further west than airbases on the territory of the Russian Federation. These differences matter greatly to the scale and scope of the air and missile threat Russia can pose to

NATO's southeastern flank as well as to Russia's ability to prepare and support future invasions of Ukraine. Of all the Ukrainian lands NATO should desire Ukraine to regain for NATO's own interests, Crimea should be at the top of the list.

**Principled legal, moral, and ethical considerations require supporting Ukraine's efforts to regain its lost lands and people and should not be dismissed. The aim of this essay has been to show that purely military realities and strategic considerations lead to the same conclusion. If Ukraine is to emerge from this war able to defend itself against a future Russian attack and with a viable economy that does not rely on long-term international financial support, it must liberate almost all its territory.**

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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 15

[\*\*Click here to read the full report\*\*](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mapes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 15, 8:30pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russia continues to conduct massive, forced deportations of Ukrainians that likely amount to a deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign in addition to apparent violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.** Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat

Khusnulin stated on October 14 that "several thousand" children from Kherson Oblast are "already in other regions of Russia, resting in rest homes and children's camps."<sup>[1]</sup> As ISW has previously reported, Russian authorities openly admitted to placing children from occupied areas of Ukraine up for adoption with Russian families in a manner that may constitute a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.<sup>[2]</sup>

Russian authorities may additionally be engaged in a wider campaign of ethnic cleansing by depopulating Ukrainian territory through deportations and repopulating Ukrainian cities with imported Russian citizens. Ethnic cleansing has not in itself been specified as a crime under international law but has been defined by the United Nations Commission of Experts on violations of humanitarian law committed on the territory of the former Yugoslavia as "rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove persons of given groups from the area" and "a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas."<sup>[3]</sup> According to the UN definition, ethnic cleansing may be carried out by forcible removal, among other methods.<sup>[4]</sup> These definitions of ethnic cleansing campaigns are consistent with reports of the forcible deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children, as well as reports by Ukrainian sources that reconstruction projects in Mariupol are intended to house "tens of thousands of Russians" who will move to Mariupol.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Prominent Russian milbloggers who yesterday announced the existence of "hit lists" reportedly originating with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and targeting milbloggers for their coverage of operations in Ukraine walked back their claim on October 15.** As ISW reported on October 14, prominent Russian milblogger Semyon Pegov of the WarGonzo Telegram channel accused "individual generals and military commanders" of the Russian MoD of developing a "hitlist" of Russian milbloggers whom the MoD intends to prosecute for "discrediting" the MoD's handling of the war in Ukraine.<sup>[6]</sup> Pegov's claim was amplified by several other milbloggers and generated substantial panic about censorship in the hyper-nationalist Russian information space.<sup>[7]</sup>

Pegov announced on October 15, however, that "there are no more lists", and that the issue of lists has been removed from the agenda and congratulated his following and the wider milblogger community for being untouchable in the face of attempted crackdowns.<sup>[8]</sup> Pegov also reiterated that he has been aware of the list for weeks and knew that administrative and political power structures had already begun working on investigations of individual channels. Pegov claimed that he has learned who the author of the list was and praised his followers and colleagues for supporting him. Other prominent milbloggers

amplified Pegov's statements and stated that milbloggers continue to lead the fight for truth in the information space.

As ISW has previously assessed the announcement of mobilization served as a catalyst for a breakdown in the Russian information space that put the increasingly alienated MoD further at odds with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the cohort of milbloggers that he has periodically supported and empowered.[9] The Russian milblogger community may have strategically weaponized the rumors of MoD hit lists against the MoD itself by exposing the information and appearing to defeat the MoD attacks against it—whether or not they were real in the first place. The discourse surrounding the existence of these lists indicates continued structural fractures between the MoD establishment, the milbloggers, and the Kremlin.

**The Wagner Group Private Military Company is likely continuing efforts to assert its supremacy over the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and conventional Russian ground forces.** A video posted to social media on October 13 shows servicemen of the 126th Coastal Defense Brigade of the Black Sea Fleet in an unspecified location in Kherson Oblast complaining that they have been fighting in the area since the beginning of the war without breaks or troop rotation.[10] The servicemen asserted that they are being “crushed” by Ukrainian forces and emphasized that they have one BTR (armored personnel carrier) for 80 people, which is greatly restricting their maneuverability.[11] After the video circulated, a Wagner Group-affiliated Telegram channel announced on October 14 that Wagner Group leadership decided to transfer four off-road vehicles to the 126th Coastal Defense Battalion in support of their efforts to hold the frontline in Kherson Oblast.[12] This exchange is noteworthy in light of ISW’s previous assessment that Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is actively attempting to curry favor with Russian President Vladimir Putin and set Wagner Group forces apart from conventional MoD forces.[13] The move to donate basic equipment to a detachment of conventional Russian ground forces may be an implicit critique of the MoD’s apparent inability to provide such necessities to its own soldiers.

**Russia may have signed a new contract with Iran for the supply of Arash-2 drones.** Ukrainian and Russian Telegram channels reported “leaked” information from unspecified Iranian sources that Russia has purchased an unknown number of Arash-2 drones, which are purportedly faster and more destructive than the Shahed-136 drones that are currently in use by Russian forces.[14] Commander of the Iranian Ground Forces Brigadier General Kiomars Heydari previously claimed in early September that the Arash-2 drones have unique long-range capabilities and could target cities in Israel such as Tel Aviv and Haifa from bases in Iran.[15] Reports that Moscow is continuing to rely on Tehran for destructive munitions are consistent with a report from the US Treasury Department that suggests Russia is rapidly expending its supply of microelectronics that are critical for the military-industrial complex because it cannot replace key components unavailable because of sanctions.[16] Russia will likely continue to leverage its relationship with Iran to circumvent sanctions, although it is very unlikely that Russian forces will use the Arash-2 to any greater effect than they have used the Shahed-136 model.[17]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russia is conducting forced deportation of Ukrainians that likely amount to a deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign in addition to apparent violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.**
- **Prominent Russian milbloggers who yesterday announced the existence of “hit lists” reportedly originating with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and targeting milbloggers for their coverage of operations in Ukraine walked back their claim on October 15.**
- **The Wagner Group Private Military Company is likely continuing efforts to assert its supremacy over the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and more conventional Russian ground forces.**
- **Russia may have signed a new contract with Iran for the supply of Arash-2 drones.**
- **Russian forces continued counterattacks west of Kremenna.**
- **Russian milbloggers widely discussed the likelihood of a Ukrainian counteroffensive on Kremenna and Svatove.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian troops launched a general counteroffensive in northern Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian forces likely struck Russian military assets situated along Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Zaporizhia Oblast and southern Donetsk Oblast.**

- **Mobilized Russian forces engaged in a fratricidal altercation at a training ground in Belgorod Oblast.**
  - **Russian and occupation administration officials continued to enact restrictions on movement and conduct strict law enforcement activities in Russian-occupied territories**
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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 14

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 14, 7:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin likely attempted to make a virtue of necessity by announcing that his “partial” mobilization will end in “about two weeks”—the same time the postponed fall conscription cycle is set to begin. Putin told reporters on October 14 that “nothing additional is planned” and that “partial mobilization is almost over.”[1] As ISW previously reported, Putin announced the postponement of Russia’s usual autumn conscription cycle from October 1 to November 1 on September 30, likely because Russia’s partial mobilization is taxing the bureaucracy of the Russian military commissariats that oversee the semiannual conscription cycle.[2] Putin therefore likely needs to pause or end his partial mobilization to free up bureaucratic resources for conscription. Putin ordered the conscription of 120,000 men for the autumn cycle, 7,000 fewer than in autumn 2021. However, Russia’s annexation of occupied Ukraine changes the calculus for conscripts. Russian law generally prohibits the deployment of conscripts abroad. Russian law now considers Russian-occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts to be Russian territory, however, ostensibly legalizing the use of conscripts on the front lines.

**Putin may intend for mobilized personnel to plug gaps in Russia’s frontlines long enough for the autumn conscripts to receive some training and form additional units to improve Russian combat power in 2023.** Putin confirmed on October 14 that mobilized personnel are receiving little training before they are sent to the frontlines. Putin announced that of the 220,000 people who have been mobilized since his September 21 order, 35,000 are already in Russian military units and 16,000 are already in units “involved in combat missions.”[3] Putin also outlined the training these mobilized forces allegedly receive: 5-10 days of “initial training,” 5-15 days of training with combat units, “then the next stage is already directly in the troops taking part in hostilities.” This statement corroborates dozens of anecdotal reports from Russian outlets, milbloggers, and mobilized personnel of untrained, unequipped, and utterly unprepared men being rushed to the frontlines, where some have already surrendered to Ukrainian forces and others have been killed.[4] Even the 10 days of training that mobilized personnel may receive likely does not consist of actual combat preparation for most units; anecdotal reports suggest that men in some units wandered around training grounds without commanding officers, food, or shelter for several days before being shipped to Ukraine.[5] Many would-be trainers and officers were likely injured or killed in Ukraine before mobilization began.[6] Russian training grounds are also likely understaffed, a problem that will likely persist into the autumn conscription cycle. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on October 14 that Russian military officials in Krasnodar Krai suspended sending mobilized persons to the training grounds in Primorsko-Akhtarsk until November 1 because Russian training grounds are not ready to accommodate, train or comprehensively provide for a large number of personnel.[7]

**Ukrainian and Western officials continue to reiterate that they have observed no indicators of preparations for a Belarusian invasion of Ukraine, despite alarmist reports in the Belarusian information space that President Alexander Lukashenko has introduced a “counter-terrorist operation” regime.**[8] Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei gave an interview to Russian outlet *Izvestia* on October 14 wherein he claimed that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko introduced a “counter-terrorist operation regime” after a meeting with several law enforcement agencies.[9] Makei cited concern that unspecified neighboring states were planning provocations related to seizure of areas of Belarusian territory.[10] This claim was amplified by several Ukrainian, Belarusian,

and Russian sources, who claimed that as part of the "counter-terrorist operation regime," Lukashenko began deploying groups of Belarusian forces supplemented by Russian troops.[11] Belarusian opposition outlet *Nasha Niva* claimed that as part of this regime, Belarusian forces are conducting covert mobilization under the guise of combat readiness checks.[12] However, Lukashenko emphasized in a comment to the press that there has been no introduction of a "counter-terrorist operation regime" and that he has instead introduced a "regime of a heightened terrorist threat."[13]

Despite the contradicting claims of an escalated preparatory regime in Belarus, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told *Voice of America* that there are no indicators that Belarusian troops are preparing to enter Ukraine.[14] ISW continues to assess that joint Belarusian and Russian forces will not invade Ukraine from the territory of Belarus. Russian forces continue to attrit their own combat capabilities as they impale themselves on attempts to capture tiny villages in Donbas and simply do not have the combat-effective mechanized troops available to supplement a Belarusian incursion into northern Ukraine and certainly not to conduct a mechanized drive on Kyiv. As ISW has previously reported, Lukashenko remains unlikely to enter the war on Russia's behalf due to the domestic risks this would pose for the continued viability of his regime, as well as the low quality of Belarusian Armed Forces.[15] Russian President Vladimir Putin is more likely weaponizing concerns over Belarusian involvement in the war to pin Ukrainian troops against the northern Ukraine-Belarus border.

**Russian authorities are continuing to engage in "Russification" social programming schemes that target Ukrainian children.** A local news outlet from Russia's Novosibirsk Oblast reported on October 13 that 24 orphans from Luhansk Oblast arrived in Novosibirsk for placement with Russian foster families.[16] Ukrainian Mayor of Melitopol Ivan Fedorov similarly reported that Russian occupation authorities in Melitopol and other occupied regions are deporting Ukrainian children to Russian-occupied Crimea, Krasnodar Krai, and Tula and Volgograd Oblasts under the guise of "children's trips" and "further education" programs.[17] As ISW has previously reported, such forced deportations of Ukrainian children to Russia and Russian-occupied territory may constitute violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[18] Occupation authorities in Russian-occupied Mariupol are also reportedly pressuring Ukrainian teenagers to join the "Youth Guard," a children's paramilitary organization that encourages anti-Ukrainian sentiments. Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko reported on October 14 that uniformed members of the Youth Guard visited a Ukrainian school and gave children one week to consider joining the group.[19] The coerced engagement of Ukrainian children in youth militarization programs fits into wider Russification schemes intended to erase Ukrainian identity in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on October 14 that there is currently no additional need for further massive strikes against Ukraine.** Putin claimed that Russian forces struck 22 of their 29 intended targets and that there are now unspecified "other tasks" for Russian forces to accomplish.[20] Putin's statement was likely aimed at mitigating informational backlash among pro-war milbloggers who oppose curtailing the costly missile campaign; Russian milbloggers had largely praised the resumption of strikes against Ukrainian cities but warned that a short campaign would be ineffective. Putin's statement supports ISW's previous assessment that Putin knew he would not be able to sustain high-intensity missiles strikes for a long time due to a dwindling arsenal of high-precision missiles.[21] Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov claimed on October 14 that Russian forces have 609 high-precision missiles left from the pre-war stockpile of 1,844.[22] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued cruise missile, aviation, kamikaze drone, and anti-aircraft missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure in Kyiv Oblast, Zaporizhzhia City, Mykolaiv City, and other areas in Mykolaiv Oblast on October 14.[23] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on October 14 that Russian forces targeted Ukrainian command and control elements and energy infrastructure in Kyiv and Kharkiv oblasts with sea-based missiles.[24] These reports demonstrate a lower tempo of strikes than the 84 cruise missile strikes reported on October 10.[25]

**A prominent Russian milblogger accused unspecified senior officials within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of preparing to censor Russian milbloggers on October 14.** Prominent Russian milblogger Semyon Pegov (employed by Telegram channel WarGonzo) accused "individual generals and military commanders" of developing a "hitlist" of Russian milbloggers that the MoD seeks to criminally prosecute for "discrediting" the Russian MoD's activity and the Russian special military operation in Ukraine.[26] Russian news aggregator *Mash* reported on October 14 that Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov personally signed an order instructing Russian state media censor Roskomnadzor to investigate prominent Russian milbloggers Igor Girkin (also known as Igor Strelkov), Semyon Pegov

(WarGonzo), Yuri Podolyaka, Vladlen Tatarsky, Sergey Mardan, Igor Dimitriev, Kristina Potupchik, and authors of the Telegram channels GreyZone and Rybar. Unspecified Russian authorities detained the manager of several milblogger Telegram channels linked to Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin on October 5.[27] Moscow police previously arrested and released Pegov under unusual circumstances (reportedly for drunkenly threatening a hotel administrator) in Moscow on September 2.[28] The situation will likely become clearer in the coming days. A key indicator for the status of a crackdown on Russian milbloggers will be any status update from former Russian militant commander and nationalist milblogger Igor Girkin. Girkin has not posted since October 10—a significant change in his behavior given that he usually posts multiple times daily.[29]

**There has been no official confirmation of an investigation or prosecution of these milbloggers as of October 14.** Senior Russian propagandist and *RT* Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan responded to Pegov's claim on October 14 and implied that prosecuting military bloggers is not only a bad idea but impossible to implement.[30] Many milbloggers expressed outrage at the prospect that elements of the Russian government would seek to censor ardent patriots who seek to hold the MoD accountable and expressed hopes that "rumors" about the milblogger hitlist are untrue.[31] The interests of the Kremlin do not intrinsically align with the MoD in this situation: Putin has overtly courted the support of the milblogger community in recent months, as ISW has extensively covered, and has used the milbloggers to frame senior MoD officials and the MoD as a whole as possible scapegoats for military failures in Ukraine.[32] Nor did the milbloggers blame the Kremlin for the alleged hitlist; Pegov emphasized that this sort of alleged censorship was likely not Putin's intention when he opened dialogue with milbloggers in June and called for reporters and journalists to tell the truth about the "special military operation."[33]

### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that his "partial" mobilization will end in "about two weeks"—likely to free up bureaucratic bandwidth for the normal autumn conscription cycle that will begin on November 1.
- Putin may intend for mobilized personnel to plug gaps in Russia's frontlines long enough for the autumn conscripts to receive some training and form additional units to improve Russian combat power in 2023.
- Ukrainian and Western officials continue to reiterate that they have observed no indicators of preparations for a Belarusian invasion of Ukraine, despite alarmist reports in the Belarusian information space that President Alexander Lukashenko has introduced a "counter-terrorist operation" regime.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on October 14 that there is currently no additional need for further massive strikes against Ukraine.
- Russian authorities are continuing to engage in "Russification" social programming schemes that target Ukrainian children.
- A prominent Russian milblogger accused unspecified senior officials within the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of preparing to censor Russian milbloggers on October 14, but there is no official confirmation of an investigation or prosecution of these milbloggers.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian forces are conducting counteroffensive operations in northeast Kharkiv Oblast east of Kupyansk.
- Russian troops conducted limited ground attacks west of Kreminna in order to regain lost positions.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in northwestern Kherson Oblast in order to regain lost positions.
- Russian troops continued ground attacks around Bakhmut and Donetsk City.
- Russian authorities expressed increasing concern over Ukrainian strikes against Russian rear logistics lines in southern Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities are continuing to consolidate control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) through strengthened security measures amid negotiations to establish a nuclear safety and protective zone at the plant.

- Russian officials continued to brand their movement of populations out of Kherson Oblast as recreational “humanitarian trips” rather than evacuations.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 13, 9:15 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Public reports of the first deaths of ill-prepared mobilized Russian troops in Ukraine have sparked renewed criticism of the Russian military command. Russian media reported that five mobilized men from Chelyabinsk have already died in combat in Ukraine just three weeks after President Vladimir Putin's declaration of partial mobilization on September 21.[1] The report led many pro-war milbloggers to claim that the number of dead and wounded among mobilized servicemen is likely higher than this due to lack of promised training, equipment, unit cohesion, and commanders, as well as repeated instances of wrongful mobilization.

Russian milbloggers claimed that Commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District (SMD), Mikhail Zusko, ordered the immediate deployment without any pre-combat training of newly mobilized servicemen of the 15th Regiment of the 27th Motor Rifle Brigade from Moscow City and Moscow Oblast to the collapsing frontline around Svatove around October 2nd and 3rd.[2] Ukrainian outlets had previously reported that the Kremlin has arrested Zusko due to combat losses, and it is unclear why an SMD commander would issue orders pertaining to a unit within the Western Military District (WMD).[3] Milbloggers noted that relatives found half of the 15th Regiment personnel wounded in a Belgorod Oblast hospital after the unit got caught in heavy artillery fire when attempting to reach the Svatove frontline. Milbloggers noted that the regiment had no orders, military command supervision, signal, or supplies, and that the other half of its personnel is still at the Svatove frontline. Another milblogger noted witnessing the coffins of mobilized men arrive in Chelyabinsk, Moscow, and Yekaterinburg, and claimed that many mobilized men are surrendering to Ukrainian forces.[4] One Russian milblogger complained on October 13 that newly mobilized men are being deployed in a haphazard way that will lead to 10,000 deaths and 40,000 injuries among them by February 2023.[5]

Russian mobilization structures are continuing to face bureaucratic challenges, which may further undermine the combat effectiveness of mobilized personnel. Milbloggers claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) did not set proper conditions to integrate and monitor the deployment of mobilized men at the frontlines.[6] Russian military units reportedly disperse mobilized men among different units without keeping proper records of their deployed locations on the frontlines, causing families to complain to military leadership. Russian military officials are also continuing to assign men with previous military experience to units that do not match their expertise. One milblogger even warned that Russian MoD's inability to properly update families of the whereabouts of their relatives will lead mothers and wives to form human rights groups that “will break Russia from within.”[7]

ISW cannot independently verify milblogger claims, but the community has been proactive in highlighting the Kremlin's mobilization since the day of its declaration in hopes of improving the prospects of the Russian war in Ukraine.[8] ISW has also previously reported on a video of mobilized men from Moscow Oblast in Svatove who complained about their lack of equipment and deployment to the frontlines without proper training, which corroborates some milblogger reports.[9] The persistence of such complaints supports ISW's assessment that the mobilization campaign will not produce enough combat-ready Russian personnel to affect the course of the war in the short term. The Kremlin's rapid deployment of mobilized servicemen to the Kremenna-Svatove line may also indicate that Russian President Vladimir Putin is willing to throw away the lives of mobilized men in a desperate effort to preserve a collapsing frontline.

**The Kremlin continues to struggle to message itself out of the reality of mobilization and military failures.** The Kremlin continued its general pattern of temporarily appeasing the nationalist communities by conducting retaliatory missile strikes on Ukraine in an effort to deflect from persistent mobilization problems. Renewed milblogger critiques about mobilization again show how ephemeral the Kremlin's successes are at deflecting attention from them. The nationalist community resumed its calls on the Kremlin to replace senior officials and commanders and declare war, which some had anticipated would be the Kremlin's response to the Kerch Strait Bridge explosions, broken mobilization process, and loss of most of Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman.[10] The Kremlin remains trapped in a cycle of appeasing its pro-war constituencies but retaining Russian President Vladimir Putin's vision of a limited war in Ukraine that is incompatible with their demands and expectations.

**Russian forces continued to launch strikes on critical Ukrainian infrastructure on October**

**13.** Ukraine's Western Air Command noted that Russian forces launched Kalibr cruise missiles at infrastructure in western Ukraine, four of which Ukrainian troops destroyed.[11] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops launched missile strikes on critical infrastructure and civilian objects in Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Mykolaiv Oblasts throughout the day on October 13.[12] Ukrainian military sources also reported that Russian troops continued drone attacks all over Ukraine, and that Ukrainian troops shot down four drones over Vinnytsia and Cherkassy on October 12.[13] Social media footage additionally shows explosions in Rivne, Ternopil, Lviv, Chernivtsi Oblasts following the activation of Ukrainian air defense systems.[14]

**Russian forces are likely continuing to use Iranian Shahed-136 drones to support massive strike campaigns against critical Ukrainian infrastructure due to their low efficacy in active combat situations.** Ukraine's Southern Operational Command Spokesperson, Nataliya Humenyuk, claimed on October 13 that Russian forces are employing Shahed-136s primarily to strike buildings and infrastructure because the drones have limited efficacy against troop concentrations.[15] Humenyuk cited various sources who stated that Russia has received between 300 to several thousand Shahed-136s and is using them in areas as far away as 1,000km from the launch point, which is why Shahed-136 use has been densely concentrated around southern Ukraine.[16] Russian forces are also increasingly trying to launch the drones from the northern border area. Humenyuk's statement, and the pattern of recent Shahed-136 strikes against infrastructure in Ukrainian rear areas, supports ISW's previous assessment that Shahed-136s will not generate asymmetric effects for Russian forces because they are not being used to strike areas of critical military significance in a way that directly influences the frontline.[17]

**Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is likely continuing efforts to distinguish himself and Wagner Group forces from more conventional Russian and proxy troops.** Prigozhin emphasized in a comment to Russian outlet *RIA FAN* that Wagner Group forces singlehandedly took control of Ivanhrad, a settlement just south of Bakhmut, on October 13.[18] However, the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Territorial Defense Force claimed that Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) and DNR joint forces took control of Ivanhrad and the nearby settlement of Optyne, apparently contradicting Prigozhin's statement that "not a single person from other units, except for employees of the Wagner Private Military Company" was in Ivanhrad at the time of its capture.[19] Prigozhin additionally rebutted the claim that Russian forces have taken Optyne and stated that fierce fighting is ongoing on its outskirts.[20] The disconnect between Prigozhin's and the DNR Territorial Defense's claims, as well as Prigozhin's apparent desire to have Wagner Group fighters receive sole credit for the capture of Ivanhrad, is consistent with ISW's previous observations that Prigozhin is jockeying for more prominence against the backdrop of his recent harsh critiques of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) establishment.[21]

**Increasingly degraded morale, discipline, and combat capabilities among Russian troops in combat zones in Ukraine may be leading to temporary suspensions in offensive operations in limited areas.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that, particularly in Donetsk Oblast, certain Russian units are receiving orders from commanders to temporarily halt offensive operations due to extremely low morale, psychological conditions, high rates of desertion, and non-execution of combat orders.[22] The General Staff statement is likely a reflection of the fact that Russian detachments are becoming increasingly degraded as they impale themselves on relatively small and insignificant settlements throughout Donetsk Oblast, especially around Bakhmut and the Donetsk City area. As these units become more degraded, they are likely reconstituted ad hoc with disparate combat elements, which leads to further demoralization and incoherence in the conduct of offensive operations. However, the apparent suspension of offensive operations in areas of Donetsk Oblast, nearly the only areas in Ukraine where

Russian troops are engaged in offensive operations, will further complicate Russian efforts to take additional territory and likely further contribute to poor morale and overall attrition of combat capabilities.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Public reports of the first deaths of ill-prepared mobilized Russian troops in Ukraine have sparked renewed criticism of the Russian military command.
- Russian forces continued to launch strikes on critical Ukrainian infrastructure on October 13.
- Increasingly degraded morale, discipline, and combat capabilities among Russian troops in combat zones in Ukraine may be leading to temporary suspensions in offensive operations in limited areas.
- Ukrainian forces made gains northwest of Svatove.
- Russian forces are continuing defensive operations in anticipation of potential Ukrainian attacks towards Kremenna.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that Russian troops are attempting to recapture positions in northern and northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Damage to the Kerch Strait Bridge continues to impede the movement of Russian supplies and personnel to southern Ukraine.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast and claimed to make marginal advances south of Bakhmut.
- Russian incompetence continues to take its toll on mobilized personnel before they ever reach the front lines, likely exacerbating already-low morale.
- Russian officials are likely increasingly limiting freedom of movement in Russia to preserve additional mobilizable populations and prevent them from fleeing the country.
- Russian occupation officials called for the evacuation of civilians from occupied Kherson Oblast.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 12**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 12, 7:45pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russia has seemingly intensified its information operation to falsely portray Ukraine as a terrorist state, likely to set information conditions to counter efforts to designate Russia as a terrorist state. Several Russian sources made unverified claims that Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officers detained Ukrainian citizens for allegedly planning "terrorist attacks" in Sverdlovsk, Moscow, and Bryansk oblasts on October 12.[1] Russian milbloggers relatedly amplified rhetoric accusing Ukraine of being a terrorist state and calling for Russian authorities to enhance "counterintelligence" procedures and formally designate Ukraine as a terrorist state.[2] Claims of preparations for alleged and subversive Ukrainian activity in Russia align with a wider attempt to set information conditions to respond to Ukrainian attempts to formally designate Russia a terrorist state, especially in the wake of recent massive attacks on critical Ukrainian infrastructure and residential areas. The Russian information space may also be setting conditions to justify further massive strikes on Ukrainian rear areas; although, as ISW has previously assessed, these tactics are part of the Russian way of war and will likely be utilized regardless of informational conditions.[3] Russian authorities may also be setting conditions for false-flag attacks against Russia framed as Ukrainian-perpetrated acts of terrorism.

**Russian forces may have brought Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated personnel to occupied areas in Ukraine to train Russian troops in the use of Shahed-136 drones.** The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on October 12 that Russian forces brought an unspecified number of Iranian instructors to Dzankoi in Crimea and Zalizniy Port and Hladivtsi in Kherson Oblast to teach Russian forces how to use Shahed-136 attack drones.[4] The Resistance Center stated that the Iranian instructors directly control the launch of drones on civilian targets in Ukraine, including in Mykolaiv and Odesa oblasts.[5] The IRGC is notably the primary operator of Iran's drone inventory, so these Iranian instructors are likely IRGC or IRGC-affiliated personnel.[6]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russia is intensifying efforts to set information conditions to falsely portray Ukraine as a terrorist state to deflect recent calls to designate Russia as a terrorist state.
- Russian forces may have imported Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated personnel to occupied areas in Ukraine to train Russian troops in the use of Shahed-136 drones.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian troops continued counteroffensive operations toward Svatove and Kreminna. Russian forces are continuing defensive operations in this area.
- Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian forces are conducting ground attacks in northwestern and western Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks around Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Russian forces are likely reinforcing the frontline in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- The Russian military continues to face problems equipping individual Russian soldiers with basic personal equipment.
- Russian and occupation administration officials continue to employ coercive measures against residents in Russian-occupied territories.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 11

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 11, 8:15 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces conducted massive missile strikes across Ukraine for the second day in a row on October 11. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian forces fired nearly 30 Kh-101 and Kh-55 cruise missiles from Tu-95 and Tu-160 strategic bombers and damaged critical infrastructure in Lviv, Vinnytsia, Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, and Zaporizhia oblasts.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian air defense reportedly destroyed 21 cruise missiles and 11 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).<sup>[2]</sup> Social media footage shows the aftermath of strikes throughout Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian forces additionally continued to launch attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure with Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones.<sup>[4]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defense destroyed eight Shahed-136 drones in Mykolaiv Oblast on the night of October 10 and 11.<sup>[5]</sup>

Army General Sergey Surovikin's previous experience as commander of Russian Armed Forces in Syria likely does not explain the massive wave of missile strikes across Ukraine over the past few days, nor does it signal a change in the trajectory of Russian capabilities or strategy in Ukraine. Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) representative, Andriy Yusov, linked the recent strikes to Surovikin's appointment as theatre commander and stated on October 11 that "throwing rockets at civilian infrastructure objects" is consistent with Surovikin's tactics in Syria.<sup>[6]</sup> However, Surovikin has been serving in Ukraine (as the Commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces and then reportedly of the southern grouping of Russian forces) since the beginning of the war, as have many senior Russian commanders similarly associated with Russian operations in Syria.<sup>[7]</sup> Army General Aleksandr Dvornikov, who was appointed in April to the role that Surovikin now holds, similarly commanded Russian forces in Syria between 2015-2016 and became known for deliberately and brutally targeting civilians.<sup>[8]</sup> Colonel General Aleksandr Chayko, the former commander of the Eastern Military District who took an active part in the first stages of the war in Ukraine, also served as Chief of Staff of Russian forces in Syria from 2015 and into 2016.<sup>[9]</sup> As ISW noted in April, all Russian military district, aerospace, and airborne commanders served at least one tour in Syria as either chief of staff or commander of Russian forces, and Russian forces deliberately targeted civilian infrastructure including hospitals and breadlines throughout the period of Russia's active engagement in that war.<sup>[10]</sup> Disregard for international law and an enthusiasm for brutalizing civilian populations was standard operating procedure for Russian forces in Syria before, during, and after Surovikin's tenure. It has become part of the Russian way of war.

Surovikin's appointment will not lead to further "Syrianization" of Russian operations in Ukraine because the battlespace in Ukraine is fundamentally different from the battlespace in Syria, and direct comparisons to Surovikin's Syrian "playbook" obfuscate the fact that Russia faces very

**different challenges in Ukraine.** Russia cannot further “Syrianize” the war largely because of its failure to gain air superiority, which precludes its ability to launch the kind of massive carpet-bombing campaigns across Ukraine that it could, and did, conduct in Syria. ISW has previously assessed that Russian air operations would have been markedly different if conducted in contested airspace or a more challenging air-defense environment, as is the case in Ukraine.[11] It is therefore highly unlikely that Surovikin’s role as theatre commander will cause a fundamental change in Russian air and missile operations in Ukraine as long as Ukraine’s Western backers continue to supply Kyiv with the air defenses needed to prevent Russia from gaining air superiority.

**Russian military officials may instead have coordinated Surovikin’s appointment and the October 10 cruise missile strikes on Ukrainian critical infrastructure to rehabilitate the perception of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).** Whoever was appointed as theatre commander would have overseen the October 10 cruise missile strikes, which Ukrainian intelligence reported had been planned as early as October 2 (and which Surovikin certainly did not plan, prepare for, and conduct on the day of his appointment).[12] Russian milbloggers have recently lauded both the massive wave of strikes on October 10 and Surovikin’s appointment and correlated the two as positive developments for Russian operations in Ukraine. This narrative may be aligned with ongoing Russian information operations to rehabilitate the reputation of Central Military District Command Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin following Russian failures around Lyman as part of a wider campaign to bolster public opinion of the Russian military establishment. The Russian MoD is evidently invested in repairing its public image, and the informational effects of the October 10 missile strikes and the appointment of Surovikin, a hero in the extremist nationalist Russian information space, are likely intended to cater to the most vocal voices in that space.

**The Russian Federation is likely extracting ammunition and other materiel from Belarusian storage bases—activity that is incompatible with setting conditions for a large-scale Russian or Belarusian ground attack against Ukraine from Belarus.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on October 11 that a train with 492 tons of ammunition from the Belarusian 43rd Missile and Ammunition Storage Arsenal in Gomel arrived at the Kirovskaya Railway Station in Crimea on an unspecified recent past date.[13] The GUR reported that Belarusian officials plan to send an additional 13 trains with weapons, equipment, ammunition, and other unspecified materiel from five different Belarusian bases to the Kamensk (Kamensk-Shakhtinsky) and Marchevo (Taganrog) railway stations in Rostov Oblast on an unspecified future date. Open-source social media footage supports this report. Geolocated footage showed at least two Belarusian trains transporting Belarusian T-72 tanks and Ural military trucks in Minsk and Tor-M2 surface-to-air missile launchers in Orsha (Vitebsk Oblast) on October 11.[14] Belarusian equipment movements into Russia indicate that Russian and Belarusian forces likely are not establishing assembly areas in Belarus. Belarusian equipment and supply movements to Crimea and Rostov Oblast indicate that Russian forces are less confident about the security of Russian ground lines of communication running through northern and western Luhansk Oblast given the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive there. Ukraine’s General Staff reiterated that it monitors Belarus and has not observed indicators of the formation of offensive groups in Belarus on October 11.[15] Russian and or Belarusian forces remain unlikely to attack Ukraine from Belarus, as ISW has previously assessed.[16]

Belarus remains a co-belligerent in Russia’s war against Ukraine, nonetheless. Belarus materially supports Russian offensives in Ukraine and provides Russian forces with havens from which to attack Ukraine with precision munitions. Russian forces struck Kyiv with Shahed-136 drones launched from Belarusian territory on October 10.[17] The GUR additionally reported that Russia deployed 32 Shahed-136 drones to Belarus as of October 10 and that Russia will deploy eight more to Belarus by October 14.[18]

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces conducted massive missile strikes across Ukraine for the second day in a row.**
- **Army General Sergey Surovikin’s previous experience as commander of Russian Armed Forces in Syria is likely unrelated to the massive wave of missile strikes across Ukraine over the past few days, nor does it signal a change in the trajectory of Russian capabilities or strategy in Ukraine.**

- The Russian Federation is likely extracting ammunition and other materiel from Belarusian storage bases, which is incompatible with the notion that Russian forces are setting conditions for a ground attack against Ukraine from Belarus.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct counteroffensives east of the Oskil River and in the direction of Kreminna-Svatove.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian troops continued ground attacks in northern and western Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces are continuing an interdiction campaign to target Russian military, technical, and logistics assets and concentration areas in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground assaults in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian reporting of explosions in Dzhankoy, Crimea, indicated panic over losing further logistics capabilities in Crimea following the Kerch Strait Bridge explosion.
- Russian federal subjects are announcing new extensions and phases of mobilization in select regions, which may indicate that they have not met their mobilization quotas.
- Russian and occupation administration officials continue to conduct filtration activities in Russian-occupied territories.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 10**

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan  
October 10, 9:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces conducted a massive missile strike attack against over 20 cities, including Kyiv, on October 10. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched over 84 cruise missiles and 24 drone attacks, 13 of which were carried out with Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian air defense shot down 43 cruise missiles, 10 Shahed-136 drones, and 3 unspecified drones. Russian forces launched missiles from 10 strategic bombers operating in the Caspian Sea and from Nizhny Novgorod, Iskander short-range ballistic missile systems, and 6 missile carriers in the Black Sea.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian forces launched the Shahed-136 drones from Crimea and Belarus.<sup>[3]</sup> Ukrainian media reported that Russian missile strikes hit 70 targets, including 29 critical infrastructure facilities, 4 high-rise buildings, 35 residential buildings, and a school.<sup>[4]</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed to have ordered the missile strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure in retaliation for a “terrorist act” at the Kerch Strait Bridge, likely in part to curry favor with the Russian pro-war nationalist camp that has been demanding such retaliation.<sup>[5]</sup> Putin accused Ukraine during his meeting with the Russian Security Council of conducting terrorist acts against Russian civilian and critical infrastructure, namely against the Kerch Strait Bridge, the Kursk Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), and segments of the Turkish Stream gas transmission system.<sup>[6]</sup> Ukrainian officials have not formally taken responsibility for the explosion at the Kerch Strait Bridge.<sup>[7]</sup> The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) also reported that Putin has been planning this attack prior to the Kerch Strait Bridge explosion, and if true, could indicate that Putin planned this attack for the deflection of the Kharkiv-Izyum-Lyman failures.<sup>[8]</sup>

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu also attended the meeting despite speculations that Putin would force him to resign, which may suggest that Putin settled on responding to only one of the pro-war community's demands at this time.

**Putin emphasized that he would conduct proportional escalation in any future retaliatory actions.** He stated that if Ukraine continues to carry out “terrorist attacks against [Russian] territory, then Russian responses will be harsh, and their scale will correspond to the level of the threat to the Russian Federation.” This declaration of proportionality suggests that Putin intends to continue climbing the escalation ladder rung by rung and cautiously rather than jumping to more dramatic measures such as the use of nuclear weapons. Putin may also mean to message the Russian pro-war camp that they should manage their expectations of an ongoing daily bombardment of Ukraine similar to the one

conducted today.<sup>[9]</sup> Russian milbloggers, for their part, have overwhelmingly welcomed the strikes and amplified Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev's statement that more attacks against Ukraine will follow soon.<sup>[10]</sup> Ukrainian and Western intelligence have previously reported that Russia has spent a significant portion of its high-precision missiles, and Putin likely knows better than Medvedev or the milbloggers that he cannot sustain attacks of this intensity for very long.<sup>[11]</sup>

**The October 10 Russian attacks wasted some of Russia's dwindling precision weapons against civilian targets, as opposed to militarily significant targets.** The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces successfully completed the mission of striking Ukrainian military command centers, signal infrastructure, and energy systems in Ukraine.<sup>[12]</sup> Social media shows that Russians instead hit a children's playground, a park, a German consulate, and a business center among other non-military targets.<sup>[13]</sup> Ukrainian air defenses also shot down half of the Russian drones and cruise missiles. Russian attacks on the Ukrainian energy grid will not likely break Ukraine's will to fight, but Russia's use of its limited supply of precision weapons in this role may deprive Putin of options to disrupt ongoing Ukrainian counter-offensives in Kherson and Luhansk Oblasts.

**Russian and Belarusian forces remain unlikely to attack Ukraine from the north despite Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's October 10 announcement that Belarus and Russia agreed to deploy the Union State's Regional Grouping of Forces (RGV)—a strategic formation of Russian and Belarusian units tasked with defending the Union State.** Lukashenko stated that he and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed on October 7 on an unspecified "deployment" of the Russian-Belarusian RGV in "connection with the escalation on the western borders of the Union State" but did not clearly define the deployment's parameters.<sup>[14]</sup> Lukashenko stated that over a thousand Russian personnel will deploy to Belarus and that a Russian-Belarusian group began forming on October 8.<sup>[15]</sup> The Russian component of any RGV formations in Belarus will likely be comprised of low-readiness mobilized men or conscripts who likely will not pose a significant conventional military threat to Ukraine.

The Russian component of the RGV is comprised of elements of the 1st Guard Tank Army, 20th Combined Arms Army, and airborne units—formations that have all sustained heavy combat losses in Ukraine and have a severely reduced combat capacity.<sup>[16]</sup> A *Kyiv Post* reporter claimed that Russian soldiers are deploying to Belarus en masse via cattle railcars without mechanized equipment on October 10—a characterization consistent with ISW's assessment.<sup>[17]</sup> ISW has previously assessed that Ukrainian reports from late September of Belarus preparing to accept 20,000 mobilized Russian men indicate that Russia hopes to use Belarusian military facilities and infrastructure to hold and potentially train newly mobilized Russian forces, but that it remains exceedingly unlikely that these are leading indicators of imminent Belarusian involvement in Ukraine on Russia's behalf.<sup>[18]</sup> The Kremlin may seek to use additional Russian forces in Belarus to fix Ukrainian forces near Kyiv and prevent their redeployment elsewhere to participate in counter-offensives. ISW has previously assessed that Lukashenko cannot afford the domestic ramifications of Belarusian involvement in Ukraine.<sup>[19]</sup> ISW also assesses that Russia does not have the ability to form a ground strike force from scratch or from existing units in Belarus quickly. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that it has not observed indicators of Russian forces forming offensive groups in Belarus and explicitly stated "there is no threat of an attack from the territory of the Republic of Belarus as of October 10."<sup>[20]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces conducted massive, coordinated missile strikes on over 20 Ukrainian cities.**
- **President Vladimir Putin claimed that the coordinated missile strikes were in retaliation for the explosion on the Kerch Strait Bridge, likely in part to curry favor with "pro-war" factions.**
- **Russian and Belarusian ground forces remain unlikely to attack Ukraine from Belarusian territory to the north.**
- **Ukrainian forces have likely liberated over 200 square kilometers of territory in western Luhansk Oblast as of October 10.**
- **Russian forces continued unsuccessful attempts to regain recently lost territory in northwest Kherson Oblast while reinforcing nearby positions with damaged and hastily mobilized units.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.**
- **Russian and occupation administration officials are setting conditions to move up to 40,000 residents out of Kherson Oblast to Russian-occupied Crimea and the Russian Federation.**
- **Russian forces cannot supply mobilized forces, likely due to years of supply theft by contract soldiers and commanders.**

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 9

[Click here to read the full report](#)

Special Edition on Russian Domestic Responses to the Kerch Strait Bridge Explosion

Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

October 9, 9:35 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

This campaign assessment special edition focuses on Russian domestic responses to the Kerch Strait Bridge explosion on October 9 and changes within the Russian chain of command.

Ukrainian forces continued to make advances towards Svatove-Kremenna highway on October 9.

Those developments are summarized briefly and will be covered in more detail tomorrow.

The attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge, coupled with recent Russian military failures and partial mobilization, is generating direct criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin from the Russian pro-war nationalist community. Some milbloggers, who represent and speak to that community on Telegram, criticized Putin's and the Kremlin's failure to address major events forthrightly, noting that it is challenging to rally behind Putin when his government relies on secrecy.<sup>[1]</sup> Others noted that Putin has consistently failed to address incidents such as the sinking of the cruiser *Moskva* or the prisoner exchange of Azovstal fighters whom the Kremlin had consistently demonized since the Battle of Mariupol.<sup>[2]</sup> Some milbloggers said that Putin must retaliate for the explosion on the Kerch Strait Bridge lest his silence be perceived as "weakness."<sup>[3]</sup> Milbloggers who did not criticize Putin instead criticized Russian Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev's silence following the explosion after he had made several public claims that an attack on the Crimean Bridge was a Russian "red line."<sup>[4]</sup> Direct criticism of Putin from this community is almost unprecedented. Milbloggers and other nationalist figures continue to express overwhelming support for Putin's goals in Ukraine and have hitherto blamed failures and setbacks on the Russian military command or the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).

These critiques from the pro-war camp may indicate rising doubts about Putin's ability to deliver on his promised goal of "denazifying" Ukraine and may undermine Putin's appeal within his core constituency. Putin's stated objectives for the invasion he launched on February 24 deeply resonated with the nationalist community, which firmly subscribes to the ideology of Russia's historic and cultural superiority and right to control over the territories of the former Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. Recent military failures have caused some milbloggers to become concerned about Putin's commitment to that ideology, however, with some milbloggers even accusing him of failing to uphold the ideology even prior to the full-scale invasion in February 2022. One milblogger noted on October 7 his disgust with the Russian political elite, including Putin, for consistently failing to seize Ukraine after the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014 and for conducting an "ugly special military operation" that only further united Ukrainians and the West against Russia.<sup>[5]</sup>

### Key inflection in ongoing military operations on October 9:

- Ukrainian forces continued to advance east of the Oskil Rver in the direction of Luhansk Oblast and have entered Stel'makhivka (about 18km west of Svatove).<sup>[27]</sup> Russian forces launched unsuccessful assaults on Burdaka on the Kharkiv Oblast-Russian border, and Terny northeast of Lyman.<sup>[28]</sup>
- Russian sources reported that Russian forces attempted to attack in the direction of Ternovi Pody (approximately 30km northwest of Kherson City)<sup>[29]</sup> Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces continued to target newly liberated settlements in northern Kherson Oblast with artillery, MLRS, and aviation.<sup>[30]</sup>
- Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian forces repelled over 30 attacks in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas.<sup>[31]</sup> Russian forces launched an unsuccessful assault southwest of Donetsk City.<sup>[32]</sup>

- Russian forces targeted residential areas of Zaporizhzhia City with cruise missiles.[33]
- A Russian milblogger accused North Ossetia and Vladikavkaz of failing to fulfill mobilization orders due to carelessness and the personal interests of regional officials.[34]
- Ukrainian sources reported that Russian occupation authorities are moving their families from Kherson Oblast to Crimea, and from Starobilsk to Luhansk City.[35]

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 8

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 8, 10:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

A large-scale explosion damaged the Kerch Strait Bridge that links occupied Crimea with Russia on October 8. Maxar satellite imagery shows that the explosion collapsed one lane of the road bridge and damaged the nearby railway track.[1] The Russian Investigative Committee stated that a truck exploded on the bridge and ignited seven fuel tanks on the railroad.[2] A small fraction of Russian milbloggers speculated that Ukrainian saboteurs used a boat to detonate the bridge from the sea, though there is no visible evidence for such a conclusion.[3] The Kremlin refrained from accusing Ukraine of sabotage or attack, echoing similar restraint following the sinking of the cruiser *Moskva* and the Ukrainian strike on Saky airfield in Crimea.[4] Ukraine did not claim responsibility for the incident, but *The New York Times* reported that an unnamed senior Ukrainian official stated that Ukrainian intelligence participated in the explosion.[5] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov noted that the Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a government commission composed of government officials, security services, and the Ministry of Emergency Situations to investigate the "emergency."<sup>[6]</sup>

**The explosion will not permanently disrupt critical Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Crimea, but its aftermath is likely to increase friction in Russian logistics for some time.** The road bridge appears at least partially operational, and the railroad bridge did not suffer significant structural damage according to Russian reports that generally seem plausible based on the available video evidence. Russian footage shows people walking on the damaged road bridge and a train moving on the railroad bridge.[7] The Head of occupied Crimea Sergey Aksyonov claimed that the remaining lane of the road bridge opened to cars and buses after a rigorous security check, but that trucks must move by ferry.[8] The collapsed lane of the road bridge will restrict Russian military movements until it is repaired, forcing some Russian forces to rely on the ferry connection for some time. Russian forces will likely still be able to transport heavy military equipment via the railroad. Russian officials will likely intensify security checks on all vehicles crossing the bridge, however, adding delays to the movement of Russian military equipment, personnel, and supplies to Crimea. Putin has already signed a decree strengthening the security protocol on the bridge under the supervision of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).[9]

**The Kremlin is likely continuing to frame the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) as the scapegoat for the Kerch Bridge explosion and other Russian military failures to deflect the blame from Putin.**

The Russian MoD has not issued an official statement regarding the incident as of this publication.[10] Russian opposition outlet *Meduza* reported that the Russian Presidential Administration sent out a guide to Russian mass media on the appropriate way to downplay the severity of the damage to the bridge, and it is possible that the Kremlin has ordered the Russian MoD to remain quiet regarding the situation.[11] Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov stated that Russia must initiate a strike campaign on critical Ukrainian infrastructure instead of listening to Russian MoD promises.[12]

**Some nationalist voices noted that Putin and his close circle are failing to immediately address the attack on a symbolic bridge, voicing direct criticism of Putin for the first time.** A milblogger warned that if Putin fails to undertake retaliatory actions it "will be mistaken for the weakness of the president himself."<sup>[13]</sup> Another milblogger noted that it is hypocritical for the Kremlin to call on Russians to rally behind Putin if he is unable to comment on significant events such as the *Moskva* sinking, prisoner

exchanges including Azovstal fighters, or the collapse of the Kharkiv frontline.[14] Others criticized the silence of Russian Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev regarding the explosion, given that Medvedev had made several statements defining any attacks on the Kerch Bridge as a violation of Russian "red lines." [15] Russian milbloggers and propagandists alike called on the Kremlin to resume strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure and notably did not make any calls for Russia to use tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine.

**Ukrainian and Russian sources claimed that the Kremlin targeted some higher military command figures following the Kerch Bridge explosion, but these reports remain unverified as of this publication.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Kremlin detained, arrested, and blocked unspecified military officials and ordered the units of the elite Dzerzhinsky Separate Operation Purpose Division to enter Moscow on October 8.[16] Milbloggers who favor the Wagner Group claimed that the Kremlin has replaced Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov supposedly with Tula Governor Alexey Dyumin and the deputy commander-in-chief of the ground forces, Lieutenant General Alexander Matovnikov, respectfully.[17] ISW cannot independently verify either of these reports at this time.

**The Kremlin named the Russian Commander of the Aerospace Forces, Army General Sergey Surovikin, the new commander of the Russian operation in Ukraine, and this appointment has generated positive feedback within the nationalist community.** Sorovikin previously commanded the "southern" group of forces in Ukraine and was reportedly responsible for the capture of Lysychansk in July.[18] Milbloggers shared their excitement regarding Surovikin's appointment, noting that Surovikin has the "tough" character necessary to regain the initiative in Ukraine.[19] Wagner financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin extravagantly praised Surovikin because he "got into a tank and rushed to save" the Soviet Union during the 1991 coup attempt in Moscow.[20] Prigozhin's interview further confirmed reports of a fissure between pro-war and "liberal" factions within the Kremlin, which ISW will consider in more detail in subsequent reports.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- A large-scale explosion seriously damaged the Kerch Strait Bridge that links occupied Crimea with Russia.
- The Kremlin named the Russian Commander of the Aerospace Forces, Army General Sergey Surovikin, the new commander of the Russian operation in Ukraine, and this appointment has generated positive feedback within the nationalist community.
- Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in Kharkiv and Luhansk Oblasts.
- Russian forces continued establishing defensive positions in northern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to attack settlements around Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and west of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly continued to shoot down Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones.
- Russian federal subjects are facing financial challenges in funding mobilization.
- Russian and occupation administration officials continued measures to remove Ukrainian children from their homes in Russian-occupied territories.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 7**

**Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan**

October 7, 9:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Western and Russian reports of fractures within the Kremlin are gaining traction within the Russian information space, undermining the appearance of stability of Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime.** The *Washington Post* reported that US intelligence obtained information that a member of Putin's inner circle directly criticized Putin's "extensive military shortcomings" during the war in Ukraine, and other Western and Kremlin-affiliated officials noted rising criticism of Putin's mishandling of the war and mobilization.[1] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov acknowledged that there have been debates in the Kremlin regarding mobilization in a statement to *The Washington Post* but denied all allegations of a member of the Kremlin confronting Putin. ISW cannot verify any of these reports are real or assess the

likelihood that these arguments or fractures will change Putin's mind about continuing the war, let alone if they will destabilize his regime. Word of fractures within Putin's inner circle have reached the hyper-patriotic and nationalist milblogger crowd, however, undermining the impression of strength and control that Putin has sought to portray throughout his reign.

Some Russian milbloggers have begun speculating that there are two factions within the Kremlin following Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Wagner Private Military Company financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's harsh criticism of the Russian higher military command.[2] A milblogger told his nearly one million readers that Kadyrov and Prigozhin are part of the faction that seeks to continue the war and accomplish its ideological goals regardless of cost. The milblogger noted that the faction opposed to them consisted of government officials who wish to negotiate with the West to save their assets and residences in the West but are too afraid to confront Putin directly. The milblogger expressed hope that the pro-war faction will defeat the faction that fails to see that Russia cannot afford to end the war.

The presentation of fundamental disagreements within Putin's inner circle and challenges to his decisions, even if quiet, within the Russian nationalist space risks depicting Putin as weak and not fully in control of his government. The truth or falseness of that presentation is less important than its injection into the audiences on which Putin most relies for continued support in his war. Putin himself may have externalized his own concerns about this break in the façade of his power and of the unanimity of his trusted senior officials in an odd exchange with a teacher on October 5.[3] Putin asked the teacher how he taught his students about the causes of the Pugachev Rebellion that challenged Catherine the Great in the mid-1770s.[4] The teacher, from Izhevsk, one of the towns that Pugachev captured during his revolt, offered answers that did not satisfy Putin, including the observation that the rebellion had occurred because of the appearance of "a leader who could capitalize on a wave of dissatisfaction," and that the lesson to be drawn from that episode of history was "that it is necessary to respect the views of other members of society." Putin offered his own answer: "The leader [Pugachev] claimed to be tsar. And how did that arise? Why was that possible?...Because of the element of weakening of the central power."<sup>[5]</sup> The exchange was bizarre and fascinating since there is no reason Pugachev's Rebellion should have been on Putin's mind at this time, nor any reason for him to worry about someone else "claiming to be tsar."—unless, of course, Putin himself perceives a weakening of the central power, i.e., himself.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Kadyrov and Prigozhin will likely attempt to make minor ground advances in Donetsk Oblast to maintain their prominence and reputation in the nationalist and proxy information spaces.** Russian forces have been making incremental advances around Bakhmut and Avdiivka between October 6 and October 7, likely with the support of Wagner and Kadyrov's elements in the area. Some milbloggers and Ukrainian officials reported that Prigozhin committed 1,000 of his troops to strengthen positions in Lysychansk to secure Russian frontlines following the collapse of the Lyman frontline.<sup>[7]</sup> Head of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Denis Pushilin even awarded Kadyrov the title of hero of the DNR.<sup>[8]</sup> The claims about Kadyrov and Prigozhin making gains and preparing to save the day coincides with Kremlin efforts to improve the reputation of the Commander of the Central Military District, Colonel-General Alexander Lapin whom they both attacked earlier.<sup>[9]</sup> Milbloggers even reported meeting Lapin, who is now reportedly commanding the Svatove-Kremenna frontline in Luhansk Oblast.<sup>[10]</sup>

**Russian President Vladimir Putin may have waited to announce that he had replaced Eastern Military District (EMD) Commander Aleksandr Chaiko until Putin could use Chaiko as a scapegoat for Russian military failures in Kharkiv and Lyman.** Russian media reported on October 7 that Putin replaced Chaiko with Lieutenant General Rustam Muradov. Chaiko is the second military district commander to be replaced since the Russian lines in Kharkiv collapsed—Putin replaced the Western Military District commander on October 3, as ISW previously reported.<sup>[11]</sup> Oddly, Russian milbloggers first reported that Muradov had replaced Chaiko on September 4, but the Kremlin has yet to formally confirm the appointment.<sup>[12]</sup> State-run and independent media outlets quoted the governor of Dagestan congratulating Muradov on his appointment and cited an entry in the Unified State Register of Legal Entities to confirm the replacement.<sup>[13]</sup> Muradov had previously commanded the eastern grouping of Russian forces in Ukraine, which is likely comprised of elements of the EMD, as of July.<sup>[14]</sup>

## **Key Takeaways**

- Western and Russian reports of fractures within the Kremlin are gaining traction within the Russian information space, undermining the appearance of stability of Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin may have waited to announce that he had replaced Eastern Military District (EMD) Commander Aleksandr Chaiko until he needed to use Chaiko as a scapegoat for Russian military failures in Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman, Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued counteroffensive operations along the Kreminna-Svatove road in western Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to establish defensive positions in northern Kherson Oblast, and Ukrainian and Russian sources reported ongoing battles north and northwest of Kherson City.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- Anecdotal reports of poor conditions for mobilized personnel in the Russian information space are continuing to fuel the accurate narrative of Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) incompetence.
- Russian officials offered basic concessions for mobilized men and their families on October 7 but continue to rely on local governments and other non-federal institutions to provide support, including food and training, to newly mobilized men.
- Russian occupation authorities in Donetsk Oblast are continuing to forcibly mobilize Ukrainian civilians, belying Russian claims that residents of newly-annexed territories will not be mobilized.
- Ukrainian officials in newly liberated Kharkiv Oblast continue to uncover Russian torture chambers and other human rights abuses.
- Russian occupation officials have likely failed to repair necessary civilian infrastructure in occupied and illegally-annexed parts of Ukraine in time for winter as temperatures drop.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 6

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Riley Bailey, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 6, 6:15pm ET

Russia's use of Iranian-made drones is not generating asymmetric effects the way the Ukrainian use of US-provided HIMARS systems has done and is unlikely to affect the course of the war significantly. The deputy chief of the Main Operational Department of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, stated on October 6 that Russian forces have used a total of 86 Iranian Shahed-136 drones against Ukraine, 60% of which Ukrainian forces have already destroyed.<sup>[1]</sup> As ISW reported yesterday, Russian forces do not appear to be focusing these drones on asymmetric nodes near the battlefield. They have used many drones against civilian targets in rear areas, likely hoping to generate nonlinear effects through terror. Such efforts are not succeeding. Ukrainian Air Force Command Spokesperson Yuri Ignat stated that the Russian army is increasingly using the Iranian-made drones to conserve its stock of high-precision missiles.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian forces have likely used a non-trivial percentage of the Shahed-136 supply so far if the claims of an anonymous US intelligence official at the end of August were correct that Iran would likely provide "hundreds" of drones to Russia.<sup>[3]</sup>

The Wagner Private Military Company announced the creation of its own private Telegram channel on October 6, indicating that Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may want a voice that is clearly his own to compete with milbloggers and possibly Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov, who all have their own Telegram channels. A Telegram channel affiliated with Prigozhin shared the invitation to the Wagner channel, "Peacekeeper." The Russian-language invitation reads "We arrived from Hell. We are WAGNER - our business is death, and business is going well."<sup>[4]</sup> In addition to Peacekeeper, the channel suggested that followers subscribe to the "Novorossiya Z Project," another private channel. The creation of a group for Wagner to share "uncensored materials from the front" may be in part a recruitment tool but is likely also an attempt to establish a formal means for Prigozhin and his allies to directly influence the information space in much the same way that Kadyrov and the Russian nationalist milbloggers use Telegram.

**Key Takeaways**

- Russia's use of Iranian-made drones is not generating asymmetric effects the way the Ukrainian use of US-provided HIMARS systems has done and is unlikely to affect the course of the war significantly.
- The Wagner Private Military Company announced the creation of its own private Telegram channel on October 6, indicating that Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin may want a voice that is clearly his own to compete with milbloggers and possibly Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov, who all have their own Telegram channels.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued counteroffensive operations in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast near Kupyansk and operations to threaten Russian positions along the Kremminna-Svatove road in western Luhansk Oblast on October 6.
- Russian troops are likely establishing defensive positions in upper Kherson Oblast following the collapse of the Russian line in northeast Kherson.
- Russian troops continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on October 6 and likely made incremental gains around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued to conduct routine artillery, air, and missile strikes west of Hulyaipole, and in Dnipropetrovsk and Mykolaiv Oblasts on October 6.
- Local Russian officials appear to be frantically looking for ways to fund their mobilized units as the Kremlin increasingly expects local administrations to pay for the war effort from their own budgets.
- The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on October 6 that Russian forces began the forced mobilization of Ukrainian citizens in Russian-occupied Kremmina and Starobilsk, Luhansk Oblast.

**Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 5**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 5, 8:00 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukraine's northern Kharkiv counteroffensive has not yet culminated after one month of successful operations and is now advancing into western Luhansk Oblast.** Ukrainian forces captured Hrekivka and Makiivka in western Luhansk Oblast (approximately 20 km southwest of Svatove) on October 5.[1] Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai reported that Ukrainian forces have begun liberating unspecified villages in Luhansk Oblast on October 5.[2] Ukrainian forces began the maneuver phase of their counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast—which has now reached Luhansk Oblast—on September 6.[3] Russian forces have failed to hold the banks of the Oskil and Siverskyi Donets rivers and leverage them as natural boundaries to prevent Ukrainian forces from projecting into vulnerable sections of Russian-occupied northeast Ukraine. The terrain in western Luhansk is suitable for the kind of rapid maneuver warfare that Ukrainian forces used effectively in eastern Kharkiv Oblast in early September, and there are no indications from open sources that the Russian military has substantially reinforced western Luhansk Oblast. Ukraine's ongoing northern and southern counteroffensives are likely forcing the Kremlin to prioritize the defense of one area of operations at the expense of another, potentially increasing the likelihood of Ukrainian success in both.

**Russian forces conducted a Shahed-136 drone strike against Bila Tserkva, Kyiv Oblast, on October 5, the first Russian strike in Kyiv Oblast since June.**[4] Footage from the aftermath of the strike shows apparent damage to residential structures.[5] Russian milbloggers lauded the destructive capability of the Shahed-136 drones but questioned why Russian forces are using such technology to target areas deep in the Ukrainian rear and far removed from active combat zones. That decision fits into the larger pattern of Russian forces expending high-precision technology on areas of Ukraine that hold limited operational significance.[6]

**Russian President Vladimir Putin took measures to assert full Russian control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).** Putin issued a decree transferring control of the ZNPP to Russian state company Rosenergoatom on October 5.[7] The ZNPP's current Ukrainian operator Energoatom announced that its president assumed the position of General Director of the ZNPP on October 5.[8] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian officials are coercing ZNPP workers into obtaining Russian passports and signing employment contracts with Rosenergoatom.[9] International Atomic Energy Agency General Director Rafael Grossi plans to meet with both Ukrainian and Russian officials this week in Kyiv and Moscow to discuss the creation of a “protective zone” around the ZNPP.[10] Russian officials will likely attempt to coerce the IAEA in upcoming discussions and negotiations into recognizing Rosenergoatom's official control of the ZNPP, and by implication Russia's illegal annexation of Zaporizhzhia Oblast.

**The head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, announced that Putin awarded him the rank of colonel general on October 5.**[11] This promotion is particularly noteworthy in the context of the recent controversy surrounding Kadyrov and his direct criticism of Central Military District (CMD) Colonel General Aleksander Lapin, which ISW has previously analyzed.[12] Although ISW has not found official confirmation of Kadyrov's promotion, Putin may have made the decision to elevate Kadyrov's rank in order to maintain the support of Kadyrov and Chechen forces while simultaneously pushing back on the Russian Ministry of Defense and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, from whom Putin seems to be rhetorically distancing himself. Kadyrov's new rank may be a sign that Putin is willing to appease the more radical and vocal calls of the *siloviki* base at the expense of the conventional military establishment.

**Increasing domestic critiques of Russia's “partial mobilization” are likely driving Putin to scapegoat the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and specifically Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.** Putin deferred mobilization for all students, including part-time and masters students, via a decree on October 5.[13] Putin told Russian outlets that because “the Ministry of Defense did not make timely changes to the legal framework on the list of those who are not subject to mobilization, adjustments have to be made.”[14] That direct critique of the MoD is also an implicit critique of Shoigu, whom Putin appears to be setting up to take the fall for the failures of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. The chairperson of the Russian State Duma Defense Committee, Colonel General (Ret.) Andrey Kartapolov, also criticized the MoD on Russian state television on October 5. Kartapolov said that all Russians know the MoD is lying and must stop, but that message is not reaching “individual leaders,” another jab at Shoigu.[15] One Russian milblogger claimed that Kartapolov's comments demonstrate that Shoigu will soon be “demolished” and “recognized as the main culprit” of Russia's military failures. The milblogger reminded his readers that it was the Russian MoD and its head that made an “invaluable and huge contribution to

the fact that we are now on the verge of a military-political catastrophe.”[16] Another milblogger defended Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and Chechen head Ramzan Kadyrov for criticizing the MoD, applauding them for driving necessary change.[17] Kadyrov’s announcement that Putin awarded him the rank of Colonel-General is similarly indicative that Putin is willing to appease the *siloviki* base that has taken continued rhetorical swings at the MoD establishment.

Putin will likely hold off on firing Shoigu for as long as he feels he can in order to continue to blame Shoigu for ongoing military failures and to build up support among other factions. Shoigu’s replacement will need to take responsibility for failures that occur after his tenure begins. Putin is already working to improve his support among the nationalist milbloggers and the *siloviki* such as Prigozhin and Kadyrov. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told reporters on October 5 that Prigozhin “makes a great contribution within his capabilities” to efforts in Russia and Ukraine and declined to answer questions surrounding Prigozhin’s critiques of government officials.[18] A milblogger emphasized on October 5 that Putin “regularly hosts military correspondents, carefully reads their reports, asks the right questions, and receives objective answers,” implicitly contrasting that relationship with the dishonest way in which milbloggers believe the MoD interacts with Putin.[19]

**Russian authorities detained the manager of several milblogger telegram channels on October 5, indicating that the Kremlin is likely setting limits on what criticism is allowed in the domestic Russian information space.** Alexander Khunshtein, the deputy secretary of the General Council of Putin’s political party, United Russia, published footage on October 5 showing Russian authorities detaining Alexei Slobodenyuk.[20] Slobodenyuk is an employee of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Patriot media group and the manager of several milblogger telegrams, the most prominent of which are “Release Z Kraken” and “Skaner.” The telegram channel “Skaner” has featured criticism of major state officials and military personnel, the most prominent of whom are Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin, and Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov. Russian authorities detained Slobodenyuk on accusations of fraud. His detention suggests that the Kremlin is attempting to set boundaries for which criticism is allowed in the information space and on which high-ranking officials milbloggers and journalists can criticize—Defense Minister Shoigu, Putin’s likely scapegoat-in-waiting, now appears to be fair game, whereas officials close to Putin such as Lavrov and Putin’s spokesperson are off-limits.

### Key Takeaways

- The Ukrainian counteroffensive that began in Kharkiv Oblast has not yet culminated and is actively pushing into Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin took measures to assert full Russian control over the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Russian forces conducted the first strike on Kyiv Oblast since June with a Shahed-136 drone.
- The Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, announced that Putin awarded him the rank of Colonel-General.
- Increasing domestic critiques of Russia’s “partial mobilization” are likely driving Putin to scapegoat the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and specifically Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.
- Ukrainian troops likely consolidated positions and regrouped in northern Kherson Oblast after making major gains over in the last 48 hours.
- Russian sources reported Ukrainian offensive preparations northwest, west, and northeast of Kherson City.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on October 5.
- Russian milbloggers continued to criticize the implementation of the Russian “partial mobilization” on October 5.
- Russian citizens who are economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority Russian communities continue to bear a disproportionate burden in mobilization rates and casualty rates according to investigative reports, suggesting that Russian authorities may be deliberately placing poor and minority Russian citizens in more dangerous positions than well-off or ethnic Russians.

- Russian President Vladimir Putin completed the final formality in the process for illegally annexing Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories on October 5.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 4

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 4, 10:00 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces continued to make significant gains in Kherson Oblast while simultaneously continuing advances in Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts on October 4.** Ukrainian forces liberated several settlements on the eastern bank of the Ihulets River along the T2207 highway, forcing Russian forces to retreat to the south toward Kherson City. Ukrainian forces also continued to push south along the Dnipro River and the T0403 highway, severing two Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in northern Kherson Oblast and forcing Russians south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border toward the Beryslav area. Ukrainian military officials noted that the Ukrainian interdiction campaign is crippling Russian attempts to transfer additional ammunition, reserves, mobilized men, and means of defense to frontline positions.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian forces also continued to advance east of the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast, and Russian sources claimed that battles are ongoing near the R66 Svatove-Kremenna highway.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement of partial mobilization is having more significant short-term impacts on the Russian domestic context than on the war in Ukraine, interacting with Russian battlefield failures to exacerbate fractures in the information space that confuse and undermine Putin's narratives.** Ukrainian sources have rightly observed that the partial mobilization is not a major threat in the short term because the Ukrainian counteroffensive is moving faster than the mobilization can generate effects.<sup>[3]</sup> Ukrainian Intelligence Chief Kyrylo Budanov even stated that mobilization in Russia is a “gift” to Ukraine because the Kremlin is finding itself in a “dead end,” caught between its failures and its determination to hold what it has seized.<sup>[4]</sup> The controversies surrounding the poorly executed partial mobilization, coupled with significant Russian defeats in Kharkiv Oblast and around Lyman, have intensified infighting between pro-Putin Russian nationalist factions and are creating new fractures among voices who speak to Putin’s core constituencies.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Putin is visibly failing at balancing the competing demands of the Russian nationalists who have become increasingly combative since mobilization began despite sharing Putin's general war aims and goals in Ukraine.** ISW has identified three main factions in the current Russian nationalist information space: Russian milbloggers and war correspondents, former Russian or proxy officers and veterans, and some of the Russian *siloviki*—people with meaningful power bases and forces of their own. Putin needs to retain the support of all three of these factions. Milbloggers present Putin’s vision to a pro-war audience in both Russia and the proxy republics. The veteran community is helping organize and support force generation campaigns.<sup>[6]</sup> The *siloviki* are providing combat power on the battlefield. Putin needs all three factions to sustain his war effort, but the failures in Ukraine combined with the chaotic partial mobilization are seemingly disrupting the radical nationalist community in Russia. Putin is currently trying to appease this community by featuring some milbloggers on state-owned television, allowing *siloviki* to generate their own forces and continue offensive operations around Bakhmut and Donetsk City, and placating veterans by ordering mobilization and engaging the general public in the war effort as they have long demanded.

Russian failures around Lyman galvanized strong and direct criticism of the commander of the Central Military District (CMD), Alexander Lapin, who supposedly commanded the Lyman grouping, as ISW has previously reported.<sup>[7]</sup> This criticism originated from the *siloviki* group, spearheaded by Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Kadyrov and Prigozhin represent an emerging voice within the regime’s fighting forces that is attacking the more traditional and conventional approach to the war pursued by Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu and the uniformed military command. The chaotic execution of Putin’s mobilization order followed by the collapse of the Lyman pocket ignited tensions between the more vocal and radical Kadyrov-Prigozhin camp, who

attacked the MoD and the uniformed military for their poor handling of the war.<sup>[8]</sup> Putin now finds himself in a dilemma. He cannot risk alienating the Kadyrov-Prigozhin camp, as he desperately needs Kadyrov's Chechen forces and Prigozhin's Wagner Group mercenaries to fight in Ukraine.<sup>[9]</sup> Nor can he disenfranchise the MoD establishment, which provides the overwhelming majority of Russian military power in Ukraine and the institutional underpinnings needed to carry out the mobilization order and continue the war.

**The Kadyrov-Prigozhin incident sparked a rift between the *siloviki* and the milbloggers, with the milbloggers defending Lapin.** Milbloggers are criticizing Kadyrov's attack on Lapin, claiming that it stems from competition between Lapin and Kadyrov-Prigozhin.<sup>[10]</sup> The Kremlin did not punish Kadyrov or Prigozhin for their direct attacks on Lapin and the Defense Ministry but has instead deflected blame for the Russian defeat in Kharkiv Oblast onto the Western Military District (WMD). Kremlin-affiliated outlets have even interviewed milbloggers who have painted Lapin as a hero for saving the stranded WMD units in Lyman, likely in an effort to divert responsibility for the Russian defeat there onto recently fired WMD Commander Colonel-General Alexander Zhuravlev.<sup>[11]</sup> Milbloggers, who had frequently complimented Kadyrov or Prigozhin before this incident, are now more skeptical of the *siloviki* community, attacking it for being too self-interested.

**Fractures are emerging within the Russian milblogger community itself, moreover.** Milbloggers have begun increasingly questioning each other's military credentials and rights to offer recommendations for the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>[12]</sup> One milblogger complained that commentators without appropriate military experience have been improperly criticizing current military commanders and should be focusing on simply portraying the situation on the frontlines without editorializing.<sup>[13]</sup> These critiques have been largely aimed at the milblogger discourse following the Russian defeat in Lyman and the Kadyrov-Prigozhin incident.<sup>[14]</sup> These attacks on some milbloggers' credentials have drawn responses from milbloggers who have met with Putin himself and are being featured on Kremlin-controlled television channels, who now declare that they are the ones who have shown the true shortcomings of the Russian forces to Putin so that he can address them.<sup>[15]</sup>

**The veterans' community is dissatisfied with the execution of Putin's mobilization.** ISW reported in May that an independent Russian veterans' organization, the All-Russian Officers Assembly, published an open letter calling on Putin to declare war on Ukraine, announce partial mobilization, and form new war-time administrations to execute the mobilization order.<sup>[16]</sup> Those new administrations would likely have improved or supplanted the military commissariats that have been mishandling the current partial mobilization. The Assembly also encouraged Putin to recognize that Russia is fighting NATO in Ukraine, not Ukrainians, long before this narrative gained prominence in the Kremlin's justifications for its defeat in Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman. This elder nationalist military community has long been warning Putin of the limitations of his forces, problems in the Russian military-industrial complex, and the failings of the Russian mobilization system. Putin has refused to order general mobilization or declare war against Ukraine, and the partial mobilization has likely been executed as poorly as those who had recommended fixing the mobilization system had feared. Former Deputy Commander of the Russian Southern Military District Andrey Gurulev stated that the Russian military command must disclose its inability to mobilize 300,000 combat-ready reservists and broaden the mobilization criteria if Russia is to have any hope of regaining the initiative in this war.<sup>[17]</sup> Gurulev even expressed his support for Kadyrov's and Prigozhin's attack on Lapin, highlighting the growing fractiousness of the nationalist information space.

**The fragmentation of the Russian nationalist information space could have significant domestic impacts and could even affect the stability of Putin's regime.** Putin will be unable to meet the mutually exclusive demands of various groups. Kadyrov and Prigozhin are pushing for a change in the way Russia fights the war to one more suited to their unconventional modes of mobilizing personnel and fighting. The veterans have been pushing for a more traditional overhaul of the Russian higher military command and MoD and for putting Russia on a conventional war footing and the Russian MoD. Russian milbloggers are currently defending the Kremlin's selection of uniformed commanders while continuing to attack the MoD and making a variety of extreme demands and recommendations of their own—all the while reporting on Russia's frontline failings in detail even as the MoD tries to silence them. Putin cannot afford to lose the support of any of these groups, nor can satisfy them all as the war wears on and Russian troops continue to sustain losses. The shocks of the Kharkiv and Lyman defeats, energized by the partial mobilization and its poor management, have exposed these deepening fissures within Putin's core constituencies to the view of all Russians. They could even begin to seed the notion that Putin is not

fully in control of his own base. The ramifications of such a development for his regime are hard to predict.

### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces continued to make significant gains in Kherson Oblast while simultaneously continuing advances in Kharkiv and Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement of partial mobilization is having more significant short-term impacts on the Russian domestic context than on the war in Ukraine, catalyzing fractures in the information space that confuse and undermine Putin's narratives.
- Ukrainian forces continued to make substantial gains in northern Kherson Oblast on October 4, beginning to collapse the sparsely-manned Russian lines in that area.
- Ukrainian forces continued to make gains in eastern Kharkiv Oblast west of Svatove on October 4, pushing past the Oskil River and increasingly threatening Russian positions in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct artillery, air, and missile strikes west of Hulyapole and in Dnipropetrovsk and Mykolaiv Oblasts on October 4.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on October 4.
- The Kremlin effectively ordered local Russian administrations and non-Ministry of Defense institutions to fund a significant part of the mobilization effort from local budgets.
- Russian security officials are attempting to maintain their domestic security apparatus as Putin's partial mobilization drains the Russian security sector to generate additional forces to fight in Ukraine.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 3

[Click here to read the full report](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Katherine Lawlor, and Frederick W. Kagan  
October 3, 9 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces continued to make substantial gains around Lyman and in Kherson Oblast in the last 48 hours.** Ukrainian and Russian sources reported that Ukrainian troops made significant breakthroughs in northern Kherson Oblast between October 2 and 3.<sup>[1]</sup> Geolocated footage corroborates Russian claims that Ukrainian troops are continuing to push east of Lyman and may have broken through the Luhansk Oblast border in the direction of Kreminna.<sup>[2]</sup> As ISW has previously reported, the Russian groupings in northern Kherson Oblast and on the Lyman front were largely comprised of units that had been regarded as among Russia's premier conventional fighting forces before the war.<sup>[3]</sup> Elements of the 144th Motorized Rifle Division of the 20th Combined Arms Army reportedly withdrew from Lyman to rear positions near Kreminna before October 2.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian sources previously reported that elements of the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV), especially the 76th Guards Air Assault Division, are active in Kherson Oblast.<sup>[5]</sup> Both the 144th Motorized Rifle Division and the 76th Guards Air Assault Division were previously lauded as some of Russia's most elite forces, and their apparent failures to hold territory against major Ukrainian counter-offensive actions is consistent with ISW's previous assessment that even the most elite Russian military forces are becoming increasingly degraded as the war continues. This phenomenon was also visible in the collapse of the 4th Tank Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army earlier in the Kharkiv counter-offensive.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Russian President Vladimir Putin may be continuing efforts to redirect blame for recent Russian military failures in Kharkiv Oblast.** Russian outlet *PBK (RBK)*, citing sources within the Russian regime, reported on October 3 that Lieutenant-General Roman Berdnikov has replaced Colonel-General Alexander Zhuravlev as commander of the Western Military District (WMD).<sup>[7]</sup> As ISW previously assessed, WMD units have been largely operating in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast over the last few months but without a clear commander. Zhuravlev has not been seen for some time, and Putin cycled through two commanders of the "western grouping of forces" in two weeks. Putin may be attempting to

redirect the growing anger for Russian losses in Kharkiv Oblast and Lyman by assigning a new face prominently to the WMD.[8] This announcement may also be an effort to shield Colonel General Alexander Lapin, commander of the Central Military District (CMD), from widespread criticism for recent Russian failures around Lyman.[9] Putin may seek to shift the blame for future Russian losses in Kharkiv and possibly Luhansk Oblasts to Berdnikov. Criticism of Lapin in recent days has served as a catalyst for wider breakdown within the Russian nationalist information space, and Berdnikov's appointment may be intended to distract and redirect that growing dissatisfaction.

**Russian officials released Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) director Ihor Murashov from detention and are likely continuing to undermine Ukrainian control of the plant.** Energoatom reported that the Russian military detained Director General of the ZNPP Ihor Murashov on September 30 and released him into Ukrainian-controlled territory on October 3 following talks with International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Raphael Grossi.[10] Russian officials will likely not allow Murashov to return to his position at the ZNPP. Russian officials will likely attempt to use their physical removal of Murashov to assert further control over the nuclear power plant.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Ukrainian forces have made substantial gains around Lyman and in northern Kherson Oblast over the last 24 hours. The Russian units defeated on these fronts were previously considered to be among Russia's premier conventional fighting forces.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin may use the appointment of Lieutenant-General Roman Berdnikov to the command of the Western Military District to redirect blame for recent or future Russian military failures in Kharkiv Oblast.**
- **Russian officials released the director of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, whom they had illegally detained, and are likely continuing to undermine Ukrainian control of the plant.**
- **Ukrainian forces made advances on the Oskil River-Kreminna line towards the Luhansk oblast border.**
- **Ukrainian forces advanced in northern Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin is introducing punitive measures to target the Russian bureaucratic institutions responsible for the execution of partial mobilization.**
- **Russian officials acknowledged that the Kremlin intends to invade, occupy, and illegally annex additional Ukrainian territory in the south and east and may alter the claimed borders of its occupied territories.**
- **The Russian State Duma approved the Kremlin's illegal accession treaties on October 3 and laid out the administrative timeline for integrating illegally annexed Ukrainian territory into the Russian Federation.**

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of October 3, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 2 Click here to read the full report.

Special Edition on Russian Information Space Following the Defeat in Lyman  
Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan

October 2, 10:15 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

This campaign assessment special edition focuses on dramatic changes in the Russian information space following the Russian defeat around Lyman and in Kharkiv Oblast and amid the failures of Russia's partial mobilization. Ukrainian forces made continued gains around Lyman, Donetsk Oblast, and have broken through Russian defensive positions in northeastern Kherson Oblast. Those developments are summarized briefly and will be covered in more detail tomorrow when more confirmation is available.



### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, October 1

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

October 1, 7 pm ET

**Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.**

**Ukrainian forces inflicted another significant operational defeat on Russia and liberated Lyman, Donetsk Oblast, on October 1.** The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced the withdrawal of Russian troops from Lyman to “more advantageous positions” to avoid the “threat of encirclement” in the settlement.<sup>[1]</sup> Social media footage and Ukrainian military officials confirmed that Ukrainian forces have entered Lyman and are likely clearing the settlement as of October 1.

**The Russian information space – composed of Kremlin propagandists, pundits, and milbloggers – registered the defeat as the result of the Russian military command’s failure to send reinforcements in a timely manner, while openly criticizing repeated bureaucratic failures during the mobilization.**<sup>[2]</sup> Russian commentators overwhelmingly expressed their hopes that partial mobilization would generate enough force to resume offensive operations and regain the initiative. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, apparently devastated by the defeat in Lyman, called on Russia to continue to fight to “liberate” the four annexed territories with all available means including low-yield nuclear weapons.<sup>[3]</sup>

Kadyrov’s rant is similar to the disorganized and often hyperbolic milblogger rants that call for the Kremlin to continue the war in Ukraine, and his call for the use of nuclear weapons was not representative of the discourse within the Russian information space. Russian federal TV channels and ultra-hawkish milbloggers have often discussed Russian nuclear capabilities as part of their efforts to stoke patriotic sentiments among Russian domestic audiences, and Kadyrov’s statement was not especially noteworthy in this context.

Kadyrov’s call for using tactical nuclear weapons is likely inconsistent with his demands to continue the “special military operation” to bring more Ukrainian territory under Russian control. The Russian military in its current state is almost certainly unable to operate on a nuclear battlefield even though it has the necessary equipment and has historically trained its units to do so. The chaotic agglomeration of exhausted contract soldiers, hastily mobilized reservists, conscripts, and mercenaries that currently comprise the Russian ground forces could not function in a nuclear environment. Any areas affected by Russian tactical nuclear weapons would thus be impassable for the Russians, likely precluding Russian advances. This consideration is another factor that reduces the likelihood of Russian tactical nuclear weapons use.

**Kadyrov blamed the commander of the Central Military District (CMD), Colonel General Alexander Lapin, for failures around Lyman. Kadyrov’s attacks gained significant traction within the Russian information space and indicate that the rift between Russian traditional and non-traditional forces is likely growing.** Kadyrov stated that Lapin, responsible for the “central” group of forces in Ukraine, failed to properly equip units operating in the Lyman area and moved his headquarters far from the frontlines. Kadyrov also accused the Russian General Staff and specifically Chief of the General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, of covering up Lapin’s failures. Wagner Group financier Evgeniy Prigozhin publicly agreed with Kadyrov’s criticism of Lapin, saying that the higher military command should fight “barefoot with machine guns on the frontlines.”<sup>[4]</sup> Milbloggers and state television hosts praised Kadyrov’s and Prigozhin’s critiques of the Russian military command, adding that the command is corrupt and disinterested in Russian strategic goals.<sup>[5]</sup> Kadyrov, Lapin, and Prigozhin are all operating in the Donbas sector, and such comments indicate the strains within the Russian forces operating in Ukraine and their leadership. The Kremlin may be amplifying such criticism to set informational conditions for personnel changes within the higher military command in weeks to come.

**The defeat around Lyman also indicates that Russian President Vladimir Putin – who has reportedly been micromanaging Russian commanders on the ground – is deprioritizing defending Luhansk Oblast in favor of holding occupied territories in southern Ukraine.** Ukrainian and Russian sources consistently indicate that Russian forces continued to reinforce Russian positions in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts, despite the recent collapse of the Kharkiv-Izyum front and even as the Russian

positions around Lyman collapsed.[6] The decision not to reinforce vulnerable Kupyansk or Lyman front lines was almost certainly Putin's, not that of the military command, and suggests that Putin cares far more about holding the strategic terrain of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts than he does about Luhansk Oblast.

**Russia is likely setting conditions to assume legal responsibility for the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).** Russian authorities detained the general director of the ZNPP, Ihor Murashov, on September 30.[7] A Russian miblogger claimed that Murashov's detention will have no tangible impact on the operation of the plant since the power units are already shut down and stated that authorities are currently undertaking "routine" legal work to transfer control of the plant to Russian state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom and create a new legal entity for the ZNPP.[8] Murashov's detention and the "legal" process of transferring control of the ZNPP to Rosatom are noteworthy indications that Russian authorities will likely seek to exploit their control of the ZNPP to pressure the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to legitimize the illegal Russian annexations of occupied Ukrainian territory by coercing it to acknowledge Russia's legal control over the ZNPP.

**Russian forces conducted a failed ground attack on Kozacha Lopan in northern Kharkiv Oblast on October 1.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian ground attack on Kozacha Lopan, 5km from the Kharkiv Oblast-Russia border.[9] Such attacks indicate that Russian President Vladimir Putin likely retains the aim of regaining control of territory beyond the oblasts he has illegally annexed and is willing to allocate Russian military assets to such offensive actions rather than dedicating them to defending against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Donbas.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces liberated Lyman and are likely clearing the settlement as of October 1.
- Russia is likely setting conditions to assume legal responsibility for the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Ukrainian troops are continuing to conduct counteroffensive operations in Kherson Oblast and setting conditions for future advances.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks in the Bakhmut and Avdiivka areas of Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued routine strikes against Ukrainian rear areas in the south.
- Russian military leadership is continuing to compromise the future reconstitution of the force by prioritizing the immediate mobilization of as many bodies as possible for ongoing fighting in Ukraine.
- Russian mobilization authorities continue to carry out discriminatory mobilization practices.

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## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 30

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 30, 8:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin did not threaten an immediate nuclear attack to halt the Ukrainian counteroffensives into Russian-occupied Ukraine during his speech announcing Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory. ISW analysts broke down Putin's speech in a separate September 30 Special Report: "[Assessing Putin's Implicit Nuclear Threats after Annexation.](#)"

Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the illegal Russian annexation of four Ukrainian territories on September 30 without clearly defining the borders of those claimed territories. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov declined to specify the borders of the newly annexed territories in a September 30 conversation with reporters: "[the] Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics [DNR and LNR] were recognized by Russia within the borders of 2014. As for the territories of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, I need to clarify this. We will clarify everything today." [1] DNR head Denis Pushilin added that even the federal district into which the annexed territories will be incorporated remains unclear: "What will it be called, what are the borders—let's wait for the final decisions, consultations are now being held on how to do it right." [2] Russian officials may clarify those boundaries and administrative

allocations in the coming days but face an inherent problem: Ukrainian forces still control large swathes of Donetsk and Zaporizhia and some areas of Luhansk and Kherson oblasts, a military reality that is unlikely to change in the coming months.

Putin likely rushed the annexation of these territories before making even basic administrative decisions on boundaries and governance. Russian officials have therefore not set clear policies or conditions for proper administration. Organizing governance for these four forcibly annexed oblasts would be bureaucratically challenging for any state after Russian forces systematically killed, arrested, or drove out the Ukrainian officials who previously ran the regional administrations. But the bureaucratic incompetence demonstrated by the Kremlin's attempted partial mobilization of Russian men suggests that Russian bureaucrats will similarly struggle to establish governance structures over a resistant and unwilling population in the warzone that is Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory.

**Putin announced that Russia's usual autumn conscription cycle will start a month late on November 1, likely because Russia's partial mobilization of Russian men is taxing the bureaucracy of the Russian military commissariats that would usually oversee the semi-annual conscription cycle.**[3] Putin's September 30 decree calls for 120,000 Russian conscripts—7,000 fewer than in autumn 2021. Neither Putin's decree nor subsequent official statements clarified whether Ukrainian civilians of conscription age (18-27) in Russia's newly-annexed occupied Ukrainian territories will be liable for conscription. A representative of Russia's Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate, Rear Admiral Vladimir Tsimlyansky, claimed that no autumn 2022 conscripts would fight in the "special operation" in Ukraine, a promise Putin also made (and broke) about the autumn 2021 and spring 2022 conscripts.[4] Russian conscripts are not legally deployable overseas until they have received at least four months of training unless Putin were to declare martial law.[5] Russia's illegal annexation of occupied areas in Ukraine likely removes this problem within the framework of Russian Federation law, which may be part of the reason for Putin's rush in announcing the annexation.

**Russian officials could re-mobilize last year's conscripts when their terms expire on October 1.** Tsimlyansky emphasized on September 30 that all Russian conscripts whose terms have expired—meaning those conscripted in autumn 2021—will be released from service and returned to their residences "in a timely manner." [6] Once released, autumn 2021 conscripts will technically become part of the Russian reserves, making them legally mobilizable under Putin's September 21 partial mobilization order.

**Putin invited some Russian milbloggers and war correspondents who have previously criticized the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) for a lack of transparency about Russian progress in Ukraine to attend his annexation speech in Moscow.**[7] Russian state media has been increasingly featuring some milbloggers on federal television channels as well, which likely indicates that Putin is attempting to secure the support of these nationalist and pro-war figures rather than censor them. The milblogger presence in Moscow may also explain why several prominent Telegram channels had limited or no coverage of daily frontline news on September 29.

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the illegal Russian annexation of four Ukrainian territories on September 30 without clearly defining the borders of those claimed territories.**
- **Putin announced that Russia's usual autumn conscription cycle will start a month late on November 1, likely because Russia's partial mobilization of Russian men is taxing the bureaucracy of the Russian military commissariats that would usually oversee the semi-annual conscription cycle.**
- **Russian officials could re-mobilize last year's conscripts when their terms expire on October 1.**
- **Ukrainian forces will likely capture or encircle Lyman within the next 72 hours.**
- **Ukrainian military officials maintained operational silence regarding Ukrainian ground maneuvers in Kherson Oblast but stated that Ukrainian forces continued to force Russian troops into defending their positions.**
- **Russian troops continued ground assaults in Donetsk Oblast.**

- Russian authorities continued efforts to coerce Russian participation in mobilization efforts, but will likely struggle to coerce participation as Russians continue to flee Russia for border states who welcome them.
- Russian officials are accepting bribes and engaging in other preferential treatment to prevent or ease the economic burden of mobilization on the wealthy.
- Russian authorities are continuing to deploy mobilized personnel to Ukraine without adequate training or equipment, and personnel are unlikely to be able to afford to provide their own supplies.
- Russian forces conducted a missile strike on a Ukrainian humanitarian convoy and attempted to blame the Ukrainian government.

### **Assessing Putin's Implicit Nuclear Threats After Annexation**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Mason Clark, Katherine Lawlor, and Kateryna Stepanenko

September 30, 12:45pm ET

Russian President Vladimir Putin did not threaten an immediate nuclear attack to halt the Ukrainian counteroffensives into Russian-occupied Ukraine during his speech announcing Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory. Putin announced Russia's illegal annexation of Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts on September 30 even as Ukrainian forces encircled Russian troops in the key city of Lyman, Luhansk Oblast, immediately demonstrating that Russia will struggle to hold the territory it claims to have annexed. Putin likely intends annexation to freeze the war along the current frontlines and allow time for Russian mobilization to reconstitute Russian forces. The annexation of parts of four Ukrainian oblasts does not signify that Putin has abandoned his stated objective of destroying the Ukrainian state for a lesser goal. As ISW assessed in May, if Putin's annexation of occupied Ukraine stabilizes the conflict along new front lines, "the Kremlin could reconstitute its forces and renew its invasion of Ukraine in the coming years, this time from a position of greater strength and territorial advantage." [1]

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 29**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, George Barros, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 29, 7:30 pm ET

**[Click here](#)** to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin continues to violate its stated "partial mobilization" procedures and contradict its own messaging even while recognizing the systematic failures within the Russian bureaucracy just eight days after the declaration of mobilization. Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged and deflected the blame for repeated "mistakes" during the first week of mobilization in his opening remarks at the Russian Security Council meeting on September 29. [1] Putin recounted instances of mobilizing men without prior military experience, assigning servicemen to the wrong specializations, and unfairly mobilizing men with health conditions or large families. ISW has previously reported that Kremlin-state media began exploring similar complaints just days after Putin's declaration of "partial mobilization." [2] Putin called on the Russian General Staff, Ministry of Defense (MoD), and federal subjects to fix the reported problems with mobilization, while noting that prosecutors and working groups within enlistment centers will monitor all complaints. Speaker of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin also announced that Russian men with a military registration cannot leave their permanent residence without the approval of enlistment centers. [3] Volodin and the Kremlin's Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov later retracted these statements, noting that the Russian MoD informed him that Russian officials may only restrict the movement of military-registered men in case of full mobilization. [4] Republic of Dagestan Head Sergey Melikov also condemned a police car with a loudspeaker that ordered all men to appear at the enlistment center while driving around Derbente, Republic of Dagestan, stating that local authorities did not authorize such announcements. [5]

**The Kremlin's contradictory statements and procedures demonstrate the fundamental nature of the systemic weakness of the Russian military establishment that have characterized the entire invasion.** Russian officials continue to execute a supposed reservist call-up as a confused undertaking

somewhere between a conscription drive and the declaration of general mobilization, likely issuing conflicting orders to already flawed bureaucratic institutions. CIA Director Williams Burns noted that even if the Kremlin manages to mobilize 300,000 men it will not be able to ensure logistic support or provide sufficient training and equipment to the newly-mobilized men.[6] Ukrainian military officials noted that Russian forces have already committed mobilized men to Kharkiv Oblast who have since told the Ukrainian forces that they did not receive any training prior to their deployment around September 15.[7] **The bureaucratic failures in the Russian partial mobilization may indicate that Putin has again bypassed the Russian higher military command or the Russian MoD.** The deployment of mobilized men to centers of hostilities on the Kharkiv or Kherson frontlines may suggest that Putin is directly working with axis commanders on the ground who are likely clamoring for reinforcements, rather than following standard military practices (that are also required by Russian law) such as providing training to the mobilized prior to their deployment to the frontlines. ISW has previously reported that Putin bypassed the Russian chain of command on numerous occasions when making decisions regarding the progress of the Russian “special military operation” in Ukraine, likely because he had lost confidence in the Russian MoD.[8] The contradictory and inconsistent narratives used by Kremlin officials and the Russian MoD about mobilization procedures could indicate that Putin, as the supreme commander, issued divergent or contradictory orders.

**Belarus remains highly unlikely to become directly involved in the war in Ukraine on the part of Russia, despite statements made by Ukrainian sources on September 29 that Belarus is preparing to accommodate newly mobilized Russian servicemen.** The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Belarus is preparing to accommodate up to 20,000 mobilized Russian men in existing civilian premises, warehouses, and abandoned agricultural facilities in Belarus.[9] Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Department of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Oleksiy Hromov, similarly stated that actions are being taken to expand the Luninets Airfield (50km from the Belarusian-Ukrainian border) and to repair storage and military infrastructure.[10] Independent monitoring organization Belarusian Hajan Project also reported that Russia delivered Su-30 aircraft to the Baranavichy airfield in Belarus.[11] These data points may indicate that Russia hopes to use Belarusian military facilities and infrastructure to hold and potentially train newly mobilized Russian forces, but it remains exceedingly unlikely that these are leading indicators of imminent Belarusian involvement in Ukraine on Russia’s behalf. Hromov also stated that there are no signs of Russian troops forming a strike group to target northern Ukraine, which suggests that Russian forces are unlikely to use Belarus as a launching pad for ground attacks into Ukraine despite reports of troop and equipment accumulations in Belarus.[12] These reports more likely suggest that Russian President Vladimir Putin is continuing to leverage his relationship with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in order to use Belarusian land for the development of Russian military capabilities. ISW has previously assessed that Lukashenko cannot afford the domestic ramifications of Belarusian involvement in Ukraine.[13] ISW also assesses that Russia does not have the ability to form a ground strike force from scratch or from existing units in Belarus quickly.

### **Key Takeaways**

- The Kremlin continues to violate its stated “partial mobilization” procedures and contradict its own messaging even while recognizing the systematic failures within the Russian bureaucracy just eight days after the declaration of mobilization.
- Belarus may be preparing to accommodate newly-mobilized Russian servicemen but remains unlikely to enter the war in Ukraine on Russia’s behalf.
- Ukrainian troops have likely nearly completed the encirclement of the Russian grouping in Lyman and cut critical ground lines of communication (GLOCS) that support Russian troops in the Drobysheve-Lyman area.
- Ukrainian military officials maintained operational silence regarding Ukrainian ground maneuvers in Kherson Oblast but stated that Russian forces are deploying newly-mobilized troops to reinforce the Kherson Oblast frontline.
- Ukrainian troops continued to target Russian logistics, transportation, and military assets in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian troops continued ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.

- Russian forces have likely increased the use of Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones in southern Ukraine.
- An independent Russian polling organization, the Levada Center, found that almost half of polled Russians are anxious about mobilization, but that support for Russian military actions declined only slightly to 44%.
- Ukrainian officials reiterated their concerns that the Kremlin will mobilize Ukrainian citizens in occupied oblasts following Russian President Vladimir Putin's annexation announcement.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 28

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 28, 7:30pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian milbloggers discussed Ukrainian gains around Lyman with increased concern on September 28, suggesting that Russian forces in this area may face imminent defeat.[1]** Several Russian milbloggers and prominent military correspondents claimed that Ukrainian troops advanced west, north, and northeast of Lyman and are working to complete the envelopment of Russian troops in Lyman and along the northern bank of the Siverskyi Donets River in this area.[2] Russian milbloggers stated that Ukrainian troops are threatening Russian positions and lines of communication that support the Lyman grouping. The collapse of the Lyman pocket will likely be highly consequential to the Russian grouping in northern Donetsk and western Luhansk oblasts and may allow Ukrainian troops to threaten Russian positions along the western Luhansk Oblast border and in the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area.

**Russian military leadership has failed to set information conditions for potentially imminent Russian defeat in Lyman.** The Russian Ministry of Defense has not addressed current Russian losses around Lyman or prepared for the collapse of this sector of the frontline, which will likely further reduce already-low Russian morale. Russian military authorities previously failed to set sufficient information conditions for Russian losses following the first stages of the Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kharkiv Oblast, devastating morale and leading to panic among Russian forces across the Eastern axis. The subsequent ire of the Russian nationalist information space likely played a role in driving the Kremlin to order partial mobilization in the days following Ukraine's initial sweeping counteroffensive in a haphazard attempt to reinforce Russian lines. Future Ukrainian gains around critical areas in Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast may drive additional wedges between Russian nationalists and military leadership, and between Russian forces and their superiors.

**The Kremlin could temporarily postpone announcing the annexation of Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory to better prepare the Russian information space and administrative organization, although September 30 remains the most likely date for some kind of annexation announcement.** ISW forecasted on September 27 that Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely announce the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory on September 30 in his planned address to both houses of the Russian parliament.[3] The Russian Ministry of Defense announced on September 28 that Russia will "fulfill the aspirations of the residents of the LNR, DNR, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts to be together with Russia" in the "near future." [4] However, Russian State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin announced on September 28 that the State Duma should hold its accession sessions to approve the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory on October 3 and 4.[5] Latvian-based Russian-language opposition outlet Meduza quoted Kremlin sources on September 28 who claimed that the Kremlin decided "not to rush things." Those sources told Meduza that "the PR effect from [annexation] will be almost zero" due to broad dissatisfaction with partial mobilization in Russia.[6] Meduza reported that the Kremlin conducted a dissatisfactory closed public opinion poll that demonstrated broad Russian discontent and may be attempting to rectify public unhappiness with mobilization before announcing annexation.

Russian-appointed occupation administration leaders of Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk Oblasts each shared an appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin by September 28, asking Putin to recognize their sham referenda and welcome them to Russia.[7] The Russian occupation leaders of each

oblast will likely meet with Putin in the coming days to present their requests. Putin could announce those performative accession negotiations, rather than final annexation, in his September 30 speech.

**Russian authorities continue to send newly-mobilized and undertrained recruits to directly reinforce severely degraded remnants of various units, including units that were previously considered to be Russia's premier conventional fighting forces.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that newly-mobilized Russian men arrived to reinforce elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Regiment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Motorized Rifle Division of the 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army in unspecified areas of Ukraine with no training at all.<sup>[8]</sup> Social media footage from September 27 shows a Russian soldier mobilized into the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Regiment explaining that he will be sent to fight in Kherson Oblast within two days without any basic training, as ISW reported yesterday.<sup>[9]</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army was considered Russia's premier mechanized force prior to February 24, and that fact that its elements are being reinforced with poorly disciplined, untrained men is consistent with ISW's previous assessments that even Russia's most elite units have sustained substantial losses in Ukraine and are therefore increasingly degraded.<sup>[10]</sup> The addition of newly mobilized forces to elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Tank Army is unlikely to lend these units any decisive combat power.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian military leadership has likely failed to set information conditions for the potential defeat of the Russian grouping in Lyman, despite increasingly concerned discourse among Russian milbloggers regarding the potential for a Ukrainian envelopment of Lyman.
- The Kremlin could temporarily postpone announcing the annexation of Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory to better prepare the Russian information space and administrative organization, although September 30 remains the most likely date for some kind of annexation announcement.
- Russian authorities continue to send newly-mobilized and undertrained recruits to directly reinforce severely degraded remnants of various units, including units that were previously considered to be Russia's premier conventional fighting forces.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued to make significant gains around Lyman on September 28, advancing from the north along the Zelena Dolyna-Kolodiazi arc and from the southeast around Yampil.
- Ukrainian military officials largely maintained operational silence regarding specific Ukrainian actions in Kherson Oblast on September 28 but stated that Ukrainian troops are continuing positional battles in unspecified locations to consolidate and improve their positions along the Southern Axis.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian military recruitment officials are openly contradicting the Kremlin's publicly-stated guidelines for mobilization to meet quota requirements even as Kremlin propaganda is attempting to change the public perception of partial mobilization.
- Russian authorities are beginning to restrict movement of Russian citizens into Russian border regions to cope with hundreds of thousands of Russian men attempting to flee the country.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 27

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, and Mason Clark

September 27, 8:30pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian authorities in occupied parts of Ukraine's Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts completed their falsified annexation "referenda" on September 27 and implausibly claimed that each sham referendum received between 87 and 99% approval from Ukrainian residents.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian officials pre-ordained and falsified the approval ratings and alleged voter

participation rates for the sham referenda while coercing Ukrainian civilians in occupied territories to performatively vote for Russian annexation, as ISW has previously reported.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely announce the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory on September 30.** The completion of the performative referenda marks the last prerequisite for Russian President Vladimir Putin to declare the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory. The UK Ministry of Defense reported that Putin will likely make the declaration before or during an address to both houses of Russia's parliament on Friday, September 30.[2] Putin followed a similar approach when he illegally annexed Ukrainian Crimea in 2014: a sham referendum, followed by a presidential decree of recognition and a treaty of accession that the Russian Federal Assembly formally approved within five days of the sham Crimean referendum. The Russian proxy leader of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), Denis Pushilin, told Russian media on September 27 that he previously asked Putin to approve the results of the referendum before it was held and would travel to Moscow to sign an agreement.[3] The head of Russia's proxy Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), Leonid Pasechnik, announced on September 27 that the LNR will join Russia "very soon" and that he will travel to Moscow on September 27 or 28 to ask Putin in person to approve the results of the sham referenda.[4] ISW previously forecasted that Putin will annex occupied Ukrainian territory by or soon after October 1 to enable the forced conscription of Ukrainian civilians into the Russian military in the normal autumn conscription cycle.[5]

**Russian forces are reportedly committing newly-mobilized Western Military District (WMD) men to the Kherson and Kharkiv Oblast frontlines without prior training.** A mobilized servicemember of the 1st Tank Regiment of an unspecified unit recorded a video plea stating that his unit will not receive training prior to deploying to Kherson Oblast on September 29.[6] RFE/RL's Mark Krutov geolocated the serviceman's surroundings to the 2nd Guards Motor Rifle Division's base in Kalininets, Moscow Oblast. ISW previously reported that Russian forces have committed elements of the 147<sup>th</sup> Artillery Regiment of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division to Kherson Oblast in late August, and are likely attempting to reinforce units in the south (that have operated in Kyiv and Kharkiv Oblasts) in short periods with untrained, newly-mobilized men.[7] Elements of the 2nd Motor Rifle Division previously based out of Izyum asked to leave their positions on August 30 due to moral exhaustion.[8] Russian opposition outlet *Mediazona* also reported that mobilized men of the 237th Tank Regiment of the WMD's 3rd Motor Rifle Division based out of Valuyki are deploying to Donbas frontlines after only one day of training.[9] ISW cannot independently verify *Mediazona*'s report, but the 237th Regiment also operated around Izyum since late March.[10] Mobilized men with a day or two of training are unlikely to meaningfully reinforce Russian positions affected by Ukrainian counteroffensives in the south and east.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian President Vladimir Putin will likely announce the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory on September 30 after Russian officials completed their falsified "referenda" on September 27.
- Russian forces are reportedly committing newly-mobilized Western Military District (WMD) men to the Kherson and Kharkiv Oblast frontlines without prior training.
- Ukrainian forces are consolidating their positions on the eastern bank of the Oskil river and made further gains on the outskirts of Lyman.
- Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) as part of the southern counter-offensive interdiction campaign, particularly disrupting Russian efforts to build barge crossings.
- Russian forces continued unsuccessful offensive operations around Bakhmut and west of Donetsk City, increasingly leveraging penal units.
- Russian forces inflicted severe damage on a Ukrainian airfield in Kryvyi Rih and continued routine air and missile strikes across southern Ukraine.
- Russian authorities are establishing checkpoints at Russia's borders to forcibly mobilize Russian men who are seeking to avoid forced mobilization by fleeing the country.
- Russian officials are setting conditions to forcibly mobilize or conscript Ukrainian civilians in soon-to-be annexed areas of occupied Ukraine.
- The Russian annexation of occupied Donetsk and Luhansk will likely exacerbate tensions within DNR and LNR forces, who regularly mutiny when asked to fight outside the borders of their own oblasts.

- Russian officials may attempt to reframe their invasion of Ukraine and occupation of soon-to-be-annexed Ukrainian territory as a “counterterrorism operation.”

*We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because those activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we™ do not describe them in these reports.*

- Ukrainian Counteroffensives—Southern and Eastern Ukraine
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and two supporting efforts);
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 26

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 26, 11:25 pm ET

**Click here** to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin is attempting to message its way out of the reality of major problems in the execution of its “partial mobilization,” but its narratives are unlikely to placate Russians who can perceive the real mistakes all around them. The Kremlin is deflecting blame for the Russian government’s failure to abide by its own stated criteria for mobilization and exemptions onto the failing bureaucratic institutions responsible for the mobilization. The Kremlin is downplaying the widespread violations of the mobilization law as individual errors of local authorities, claiming to correct these errors as citizens call attention to them. The violations are clearly too common to be merely the result of individual errors, however, and Russian citizens can see them all too clearly. Unlike Russian failures in Ukraine, which the Kremlin has been able to minimize or deflect because its citizens cannot see them directly, violations of the mobilization decree are evident to many Russians. Word of these violations does not even require access to media or social media, because they are occurring in so many locations and victims’ families can spread their anguish by word of mouth.

Russian state media has begun acknowledging social media complaints of persistent problems with the mobilization process, largely pinning the blame on the supposedly unmotivated and careless employees of the military recruitment centers.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian propagandists and heads of federal subjects are actively discussing instances of wrongful mobilization of men older than the maximum mobilizable age, those who had never served, and those who have medical conditions, as well as poor treatment of mobilized individuals. Omsk Oblast Governor Alexander Burkov claimed that the bureaucracy is the “enemy of patriotism” and blamed bureaucrats for focusing on meeting unstated quotas rather than correctly fulfilling Russian President Vladimir Putin’s partial mobilization order.<sup>[2]</sup> One state television host threatened to punish workers of military recruitment centers if they fail to abide by the limited reservist mobilization order.<sup>[3]</sup> The Kremlin’s media outlets and voices are increasingly sharing individual stories in which military recruitment centers released some men who were unfit for service following the involvement of local officials or with the help of Kremlin state media to suggest that errors are being corrected when called to the Kremlin’s attention.<sup>[4]</sup>

**The Kremlin faces a daunting task in trying to calm the Russian people while still mobilizing enough men to keep fighting.** The Kremlin’s current narrative aims to assuage its distraught and panicking population with the promise of fixing and punishing bureaucratic institutions for widespread “mistakes” in the mobilization campaign, but such messaging is unlikely to solve the Kremlin’s problems. Putin will have to fix (or convincingly appear to fix) the mobilization bureaucracy sprawling across 11 time zones while simultaneously getting it to meet the mobilization quotas he has set for it to support the war

effort. These imperatives are likely mutually exclusive in a short period of time. The Kremlin also risks further undermining this critical bureaucratic institution during an important period by continuously blaming it for failures that are likely not entirely of its making. Some Russians are already directing their anger onto enlistment officials; a man who opposed mobilization shot the head of the Ust-Ilimsk military recruitment office in Irkutsk Oblast on September 26.[5]

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 25

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Special Edition on Russian Mobilization

Frederick W. Kagan

September 25, 6 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

This campaign assessment special edition focuses on Russian military mobilization efforts.

Significant inflections ISW would normally cover in its regular sections will be summarized briefly today and addressed in more detail tomorrow.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is unlikely to overcome fundamental structural challenges in attempting to mobilize large numbers of Russians to continue his war in Ukraine. The “partial mobilization” he ordered on September 21 will generate additional forces but inefficiently and with high domestic social and political costs. The forces generated by this “partial mobilization,” critically, are very unlikely to add substantially to the Russian military’s net combat power in 2022. Putin will have to fix basic flaws in the Russian military personnel and equipment systems if mobilization is to have any significant impact even in the longer term. His actions thus far suggest that he is far more concerned with rushing bodies to the battlefield than with addressing these fundamental flaws.

**The Russian Armed Forces have not been setting conditions for an effective large-scale mobilization since at least 2008 and have not been building the kind of reserve force needed for a snap mobilization intended to produce immediate effects on the battlefield. There are no rapid solutions to these problems.**

**The problems Putin confronts stem in part from long-standing unresolved tensions in the Russian approach to generating military manpower.** Russian and Soviet military manpower policies from 1874 through 2008 were designed to support the full mass mobilization of the entire Russian and Soviet populations for full-scale war. Universal conscription and a minimum two-year service obligation was intended to ensure that virtually all military-age males received sufficient training and experience in combat specialties that they could be recalled to active service after serving their terms and rapidly go to war as effective soldiers. Most Russian and Soviet combat units were kept in a “cadre” status in peacetime—they retained a nearly full complement of officers and many non-commissioned officers, along with a small number of soldiers. Russian and Soviet doctrine and strategy required large-scale reserve mobilization to fill out these cadre units in wartime. This cadre-and-reserve approach to military manpower was common among continental European powers from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the Cold War.

**The Russian military tried to move to an all-volunteer basis amid the 2008 financial crisis and failed to make the transition fully.** The end of the Cold War and the demonstration in the 1991 Gulf War of the virtues of an all-volunteer military led many states to transition away from conscription models. The Russian military remained committed to the cadre-and-reserve model until 2008, when Putin directed his newly appointed Minister of Defense Anatoly Serdyukov to move the Russian military to a professional model and reform it to save costs following the 2008 financial crisis.[1] One such cost-cutting measure reduced the term of mandatory conscript service to 18 months in 2007 and then to one year in 2008.

**The Russian military ended up with a hybrid model blending conscript and professional soldiers.** Professional militaries are expensive because the state must offer prospective voluntary recruits far higher salaries and benefits than it gives to conscripts, who have no choice but to serve. Serdyukov quickly found that the Russian defense budget could not afford to offer enticements sufficient to overcome the centuries-old Russian resistance to military service. The Russian military thus became a mix of volunteer professional soldiers, whom the Russians call *kontraktniki*, and one-year conscripts.

**The reduction in the mandatory term of service for conscripts made Russia's reserves less combat ready.** Conscripts normally reach a bare minimum of military competence within a year—the lost second year is the period in which a cadre-and-reserve military would normally bring its conscripts to a meaningful level of combat capability. The shift to a one-year term of mandatory military service in 2008 means that the last classes of Russian men who served two-year terms are now in their early 30s. Younger men in the prime age brackets for being recalled to fight served only the abbreviated one-year period.

**The prioritization of building a professional force and the de-prioritization of conscript service likely translated into an erosion of the bureaucratic structures required for mobilization.**

Mobilization is always a bureaucratically challenging undertaking. It requires local officials throughout the entire country to perform well a task they may never conduct and rehearse rarely, if at all. Maintaining the bureaucratic infrastructure required to conduct a large-scale reserve call-up requires considerable attention from senior leadership—attention it likely did not receive in Russia over the last 15 years or so.

**Putin has already conducted at least four attempts at mobilization in the last year, likely draining the pool of available combat-ready (and willing) reservists ahead of the “partial mobilization.”**

- The Russian military launched an initiative called the Russian Combat Army Reserve (the Russian acronym is BARS) in fall 2021 with the aim of recruiting 100,000 volunteers into an organization that would train them and keep them combat-capable while still in the reserves.<sup>[2]</sup> This effort largely failed, generating only a fraction of its target by the time of the Russian invasion in February 2022.
- The Russian Armed Forces conducted an involuntary mobilization of part of its regular reserve in preparation for the invasion and in parallel with the BARS effort. Details about the pre-invasion call-up are scarce, but Western officials reported that the Russian military had recalled “tens of thousands” of reservists to fill out units before rolling into Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup>
- A third, smaller mobilization wave followed the invasion itself, as reports emerged of thousands of reservists being called up to make good Russian losses in early March 2022.<sup>[4]</sup>
- Putin launched a fourth effort at mobilizing his population for war in June 2022, accelerated in July, with a call for the formation of “volunteer battalions.”<sup>[5]</sup> This undertaking was an ad hoc attempt at crypto mobilization. The Kremlin directed all of Russia’s “federal subjects” (administrative units at the province level on the whole) to generate at least one volunteer battalion each and to pay enlistment and combat bonuses out of their own budgets. This effort has generated a number of volunteer battalions, some of which have fought in Ukraine, albeit poorly.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 24

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 24, 9 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's declarations about which categories of Russian males will be exempted from partial mobilization may not reflect Russian President Vladimir Putin's intentions or orders.** A Russian media insider claimed on September 24 that officials of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reprimanded military commissars in person for negligence in carrying out mobilization and sending out summonses in “excess,” and contrary to the explicit MoD guidance regarding exemptions for age, disability, or other limiting factors.<sup>[1]</sup> Another Russian source claimed that certain heads of federal subjects acknowledged that they have mobilized citizens who are technically ineligible.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Responsibility for the partial mobilization appears to be divided and complex, possibly contributing to confusion, disorganization, and violations of Shoigu's commitments regarding exemptions.** The mobilization decree specifies that Russian federal subjects are responsible for executing the mobilization while the MoD sets quotas and deadlines for filling them.<sup>[3]</sup> A Russian milblogger, in fact, criticized the governor of Russia's Belgorod Oblast for not being an active participant in the mobilization process and noted that the mobilization decree places the onus of carrying out mobilization orders on the heads of federal subjects and not on military commissars.<sup>[4]</sup> Military commissars likely work for the heads of federal subjects, however, rather than directly for the MoD,

making both responsible for mobilization and creating a possible gap between them and the Defense Ministry.

**The military commissars are generally acting as if they had received orders to prioritize getting bodies to training centers over adhering to Shoigu's guidelines, and the seemingly confused chains of responsibility for executing the mobilization decree may be responsible for the divergence between Shoigu's statements and commissars' actions.** Shoigu emphatically reiterated on September 21 that mobilization is partial and will only rely on those already in the reserve and with combat experience and military experience, but military commissars failed to adhere to Shoigu's guidance, practically from the onset of the mobilization order.<sup>[5]</sup> Continued reports of military commissars conducting chaotic distribution of mobilization summonses indicate that they feel significant pressure to carry out mobilization as quickly as possible. Ukrainian sources reported that Russian authorities are immediately mobilizing individuals in occupied areas of Ukraine after "rewarding" them with Russian passports for participating in sham referenda rather than waiting until annexation makes the mobilization of eligible males in Russian-occupied areas legal under Russian law. This haste suggests that military commissars feel pressure to expedite mobilization which is not reflected in Shoigu's statements.<sup>[6]</sup> The MoD is evidently not in full control of mobilization, raising questions about which Russian males actually will be mobilized and how effective the mobilized force will be.<sup>[7]</sup>

**Positions held by senior Russian military leadership are continuing to change hands, suggesting that Russian President Vladimir Putin is continuing to see systemic problems as the result of the personal failings of senior subordinates.** The Russian MoD reported on September 24 that Colonel-General Mikhail Mizintsev has been appointed Deputy Defense Minister and will oversee logistics for the Russian Armed Forces, replacing Army General Dmitry Bulgakov.<sup>[8]</sup> Mizintsev previously acted as head of the Russian National Defense Control Center and served during Russian operations in Syria, notably commanding troops on the operational-tactical level during the encirclement of Ukrainian forces in Mariupol.<sup>[9]</sup> The replacement of individual senior leaders is very unlikely to fix fundamental structural problems in the Russian military. It reflects Putin's personality-driven approach to leadership and relative disdain for system-building—both factors that contributed to the overall failures of the Russian military in this war.

**Russian forces may be preparing to forcibly mobilize Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) to fight for Russia, which would constitute a violation of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War.** Russian state media reported on September 24 that Ukrainian POWs detained at the Olenivka prison camp orally "requested" Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) authorities to allow them to fight in the DNR's volunteer "Bohdan Khmelnitsky" Cossack Battalion. [10] If Russian or Russian proxy forces coerced Ukrainian POWs into combat, it would be a violation of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, which stipulates that "no prisoner of war may at any time be sent to or detained in areas where he may be exposed to the fire of the combat zone" and shall not "be employed on labour which is of an unhealthy or dangerous nature."<sup>[11]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Local military commissars are carrying out mobilization orders in a way that suggests a possible disconnect between Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu's guidelines for partial mobilization and Russian President Vladimir Putin's demands for haste.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely continuing to address systemic issues in Russian senior command by replacing individual senior subordinates.
- Russia may be preparing to forcibly mobilize Ukrainian prisoners of war in what may constitute a violation of the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued to make gains along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border and northwest of Lyman.
- Ukrainian military officials indicated that the continued Ukrainian interdiction campaign in southern Ukraine is degrading Russian combat capabilities.
- Russian sources identified three locations where Ukrainian troops conducted ground operations in Kherson Oblast- northern Kherson Oblast, western Kherson Oblast near the Inhulets River, and northwest of Kherson City near the Mykolaiv-Kherson Oblast border.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks around Bakhmut, Donetsk City, and in western Donetsk Oblast.

- Russian authorities continue to coerce residents of occupied Ukrainian territory into voting in sham referenda.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 23

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 23, 10:00 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Russian mobilization system is struggling to execute the task Russian President Vladimir Putin set and will likely fail to produce mobilized reserve forces even of the low quality that Putin's plans would have generated unless the Kremlin can rapidly fix fundamental and systemic problems. Putin and Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu announced that the Russian Armed Forces would mobilize combat-ready reservists to quickly stabilize the frontlines and regain the initiative on the battlefield.<sup>[1]</sup> Milblogger and social media reports, however, show that Russian military recruitment centers, enlistment officials, and local administrations are mobilizing men who do not meet the Kremlin's stated criteria, especially Shoigu's promise that mobilization would prioritize men with "combat experience." Russian opposition outlets and Telegram channels leaked information suggesting that the Kremlin aims to complete this partial mobilization by November 10 and that the Kremlin is seeking to mobilize 1.2 million men instead of the publicly announced 300,000.<sup>[2]</sup> ISW cannot verify these reports, but significant available information suggests that this mobilization campaign (the first in post-Soviet Russia) is overwhelming an ineffective and unmotivated bureaucratic system and could fail to generate the much-needed combat-ready reserve force in a short time or at all.

**Russian pro-war milbloggers and social media users are raising concerns about unlawful mobilization practices and showcasing many serious Russian mobilization problems on the second day of the mobilization effort.** Russian milbloggers reported receiving numerous complaints from social media users that older men, students, employees of military industries, and civilians with no prior military experience are receiving illegal mobilization notices.<sup>[3]</sup> Shoigu and other officials have repeatedly stated that these categories of individuals would be exempt from this partial mobilization. Other sources reported that Russians are mobilizing airport and airline employees and workers from other industries.<sup>[4]</sup> The Russian government FAQ portal also indicated that local mobilization-enforcing officials may mobilize part-time students, despite the Kremlin's declaration that no students will undergo mobilization.<sup>[5]</sup> Some milbloggers noted that Russian enlistment personnel are assigning men with prior military service to very different specializations from those in which they served, while other sources recounted instances of military recruitment centers mobilizing men with chronic illnesses.<sup>[6]</sup>

The quality of Russian bureaucrats and military trainers are also raising fears among the Russian pro-war crowd that the partial mobilization effort may not succeed. Milbloggers noted that employees of the military enlistment centers are unmotivated and underpaid, reducing their enthusiasm to adhere to the envisioned mobilization plan. Milbloggers also pleaded with officers and commanders in charge of preparing mobilized men for war to train them before deployment.<sup>[7]</sup>

**Challenges and errors in the first days of executing a large-scale and demanding partial mobilization in the midst of a failing war are not necessarily surprising, although they suggest that the Russian military mobilization infrastructure was not better prepared for a major war than the Russian armed forces themselves.** It is nevertheless conceivable that the Russian Ministry of Defense will address some of the worst problems and get the mobilization effort on track. It is also possible, moreover, that much of the partial mobilization is proceeding more or less as planned and that social media and the milblogger community are highlighting problems that are serious but not necessarily pervasive. Some of the reports suggest, however, that regional mobilization officials have been given

quotas to fill and received pressure to fill them in ways that are more likely to cause errors than to reward adherence to the stated principles and the needs of an effective, combat-ready reserve force.

**Divergences from the mobilization decree and from Putin's and Shoigu's statements about the categories of men who are exempt from mobilization are also causing anger and mistrust toward Russian federal subjects and the Kremlin itself.** Some social media footage already shows mobilized men fighting with enlistment officers, arguing with mobilization representatives, and refusing to serve under unlawful orders.[8] Some milbloggers claimed that some of the discontented men who have been wrongfully mobilized would have accepted their fate if they had actually met the mobilization criterium.[9] The Kremlin is thus committing unmotivated and potentially angry men to war with the task of regaining the initiative in an offensive war in a foreign land on a battlefield far from home.

**The highly nationalist and pro-war milblogger community is calling on the Kremlin to address these mobilization issues rapidly, but the Kremlin is unlikely to be able to meet their demands.** Russian milbloggers express cautious optimism that partial mobilization will reinforce degraded combat units and allow Russian forces to advance in Donetsk Oblast, but are concerned that the Kremlin's failures to enforce mobilization according to the law and stated policies will create political unrest.[10] One milblogger stated that the Kremlin's poor handling of the partial mobilization is giving rise to "separatist movements" and opposition media.[11] Another milblogger noted that the Kremlin's failure to fix mobilization practices within the military recruitment centers may shatter Russians' trust in the military-political leadership.[12] A failed or badly flawed partial mobilization campaign may risk further alienation of the Russian nationalist crowd that has been supportive of the war and mobilization.

**Disparate mobilization processes across different regions may exacerbate social tensions in Russia already raised by perceived inequalities in the creation of volunteer battalions.** Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov stated in a live TV broadcast that the Republic of Chechnya will not conduct mobilization because the Republic has already exceeded an unspecified force generation plan by 254 percent.[13] Kadyrov added that Chechnya has already deployed 20,000 servicemen to war since February 24. Kadyrov threatened to mobilize any protesters in Chechnya and send them to the front, however. Kadyrov then seemingly modified his statements by encouraging those opposing mobilization to respect Russian sovereignty instead of using the constitution to avoid service.[14] Kadyrov's initial statement, addressed to the Chechen public, may be an attempt to both address and discourage criticism of mobilization, the war, and himself within the Chechen community. Kadyrov's statement could also be a worrisome indicator for the Kremlin—if one of the war's most vociferous and aggressive advocates feels the need to refuse to mobilize his people, at least publicly, that could indicate that even Kadyrov senses the popular resentment the partial mobilization will cause and possibly even fears it.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian partial mobilization efforts are suffering from serious and systemic problems in their first days, generating popular resentment and setting conditions to produce a mobilized reserve force incapable of accomplishing the tasks Russian President Vladimir Putin has set for it.
- Protests, attacks against recruiting centers, and vandalism have occurred across Russia in the first 48 hours after the announcement of partial mobilization.
- Ukrainian forces continued to advance north and northwest of Lyman.
- Ukrainian forces continued their interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast and maintained operational silence regarding Ukrainian progress on the axis.
- Russian forces continued to launch unsuccessful assaults near Bakhmut and northwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly shot down an Iranian-made Mohajer-6 drone in an unspecified area of the Black Sea, likely near Odesa.
- Russian occupation authorities began the voting period for their sham annexation referenda on September 23 with overt coercion and falsified turnout numbers.
- Russian occupation authorities remained on high alert to prevent partisan attacks against sham election workers, polling stations, and government facilities.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 21**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, and Mason Clark

**September 22, 8:15 pm ET**

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Kremlin's heavy-handed approach to partial mobilization may successfully meet the Kremlin's internal quota of mobilized personnel but is unlikely to generate effective soldiers and is prompting significant domestic backlash for little gain.** Russian authorities are forcibly recruiting Russian citizens to fight in Ukraine on flimsy pretexts, violating the Kremlin's promise to recruit only those with military experience. Russian authorities are also demonstrably mobilizing personnel (such as protesters) who will enter the war in Ukraine with abysmal morale. The Kremlin's heavy-handed approach to partial mobilization will likely exacerbate domestic resentment of a measure that would have been unpopular even if implemented without the harsh approaches observed in the last 24 hours.

**The Kremlin is openly not adhering to its promised conditions for partial mobilization just 24 hours after its September 21 declaration** Russian officials previously claimed that partial mobilization will only impact 300,000 men, and only those with previous military experience.<sup>[1]</sup> Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on September 22 that the practice of administering mobilization notices to detained protesters does not contradict the September 21 mobilization law. Peskov's threat contravenes the Kremlin's claim that it will abstain from mobilizing men outside of composed reservist lists.<sup>[2]</sup> Western and Russian opposition media outlets reported instances of Russian military commissars administering draft notices to protesters in Moscow and Voronezh.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian opposition outlets also reported on a bank IT specialist who had received a draft notice despite never having served in the army or attended military-education courses in university.<sup>[4]</sup> The IT specialist is likely one of many Russian men who received mobilization notices despite not meeting the stated criteria for partial mobilization. A university student in Buryatia released footage of Rosgvardia and military police pulling students from lessons, reportedly for mobilization, despite Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu repeatedly stating that Russian students will not be mobilized.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Kremlin quotas will likely force local officials to mobilize any men, regardless of their military status, to meet quota numbers.** The quota for mobilized men remains unverifiable, with Kremlin officials claiming that Russia will mobilize only 300,000 men and Russian opposition outlets' sources suggesting that the number might reach a million.<sup>[6]</sup> Regardless of the total quota, the Russian federal subjects executing the mobilization order will likely undertake recruitment measures outside of the outlined reservist call up. Some Russian federal subjects such as the Republic of Yakutia (Sakha) and Kursk Oblast are imposing laws restricting reservists from leaving their places of permanent residence.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian enlistment officers and police are also reportedly enforcing unscrupulous mobilization practices (as ISW previously observed during their crypto-mobilization campaigns) by calling up men by phone, issuing notices in the middle of the night, and notifying men of their mobilization via state social benefits websites.<sup>[8]</sup>

**The Kremlin will also likely mobilize ethnically non-Russian and immigrant communities at a disproportional rate.** A member of the Kremlin's Russian Human Rights Council, Kirill Kabanov,<sup>[9]</sup> proposed mandatory military service for Central Asian immigrants that have received Russian citizenship within the last ten years, threatening to confiscate their Russian citizenship if they do not mobilize.<sup>[10]</sup> *Current Time* reported that residents of Kurumkan, a village in the Republic of Buryatia, noted that Russian enlistment officers mobilized about 700 men of the total population of 5,500 people.<sup>[10]</sup> If witness reports from Kurumkan are accurate, they would indicate that Russian officials mobilized about 25% of the male population from a single village in a majority ethnically Buryat district. An Armenian Telegram channel published a mobilization list from Tuapse, Krasnodar Krai that reportedly consists of 90% ethnically Armenian residents, despite the town's total Armenian community being only 8.5% of the population.<sup>[11]</sup>

**The Kremlin's heavy-handed approach to mobilization is prompting public anger and distrust across Russia.** Independent Russian human rights outlet OVD-Info reported that protests took place in 42 cities across the country, including protests even in small villages in the Republic of Dagestan.<sup>[12]</sup> Unidentified assailants set fire to several military recruitment centers and local administration buildings in Nizhny Novgorod, St. Petersburg, Tolyatti, and Zabaikalsky Krai.<sup>[13]</sup> The Kremlin will likely subdue such protests in the coming days. However, declaration of partial mobilization and blatant disregard for even the government-dictated parameters for the mobilization may alienate concerned swathes of the Russian public who were previously more tolerant of the less personally impactful Russian invasion of Ukraine.

**The Kremlin likely attempted to downplay a prisoner swap with Ukraine that is deeply unpopular among Russian nationalists and milbloggers by undertaking the swap the same day Putin announced partial mobilization.** The Kremlin exchanged 215 Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs), including captured foreign nationals and Azov Battalion leaders, for at least 55 Russian POWs and political prisoners, including Putin's personal friend, Ukrainian billionaire Viktor Medvedchuk, on September 21.[\[14\]](#) The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed on September 22 that Russian and DNR and LNR POWs were in "mortal danger" in Ukrainian custody.[\[15\]](#) Far-right Russian milbloggers criticized the exchange and asked if the Kremlin had given up on the "de-Nazification" of Ukraine, one of the stated goals of the Russian invasion.[\[16\]](#) Kremlin propagandists had heavily publicized the capture and planned prosecution of Azov personnel, accusing them of being Ukrainian Nazis. Other milbloggers criticized the Kremlin for enabling what they called Ukrainian information operations and "allowing Kyiv to manipulate the mood in Russia."[\[17\]](#) Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov described the exchange as "incomprehensible," implied that Chechen forces tortured Azov prisoners in captivity, and implied that Russian forces who capture "Nazis" should kill them rather than taking them as POWs if they will be traded back to Ukraine.[\[18\]](#) Torturing or killing POWs is a war crime and a violation of the Geneva Conventions.

**The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that it began negotiations to establish a nuclear safety zone around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). Such negotiations are unlikely to significantly ameliorate the situation due to continued Russian efforts to stage provocations at the plant.** IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi stated on September 22 that the IAEA has begun "productive conversations" with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and French President Emmanuel Macron in order to establish a Nuclear Safety and Protection Zone at the ZNPP.[\[19\]](#) Despite the positive intentions of external negotiators, Russian forces may use negotiations as an opportunity to stage further provocations at the ZNPP and accuse Ukrainian troops of endangering safety of the plant, as they have repeatedly done in the past. As ISW has previously reported, Russian forces previously exploited the IAEA presence at the ZNPP in order to accuse Ukraine of disregard for nuclear safety and blame Ukrainian forces for shelling the plant, despite being unable to provide visual evidence to support their accusations.[\[20\]](#) Russian authorities may seek to leverage the IAEA negotiations to accuse Ukraine of nuclear irresponsibility in an attempt to degrade continued Western support to Ukraine.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Kremlin's heavy-handed approach to partial mobilization may successfully meet the Kremlin's internal quota of mobilized personnel, but is unlikely to generate effective soldiers and is prompting significant domestic backlash for little gain.
- The Kremlin is openly not adhering to its promised conditions for partial mobilization.
- Kremlin quotas will likely force local officials to mobilize any men, regardless of their military status, to meet quota numbers and will likely incentivize the mobilization of ethnically non-Russian and immigrant communities at a disproportional rate.
- The Kremlin likely attempted to downplay a prisoner swap with Ukraine that is deeply unpopular among Russian nationalists and milbloggers by undertaking the swap the same day Putin announced partial mobilization.
- IAEA negotiations around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant are unlikely to significantly improve the situation at the plant and may provide an information opportunity for Russian forces to stage provocations.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued limited counteroffensive operations along the Kharkiv-Luhansk Oblast border and continued attacks toward Lyman on September 22.
- Ukrainian military officials maintained their operational silence regarding Ukrainian ground attacks in Kherson Oblast on September 22 and reiterated that Ukrainian forces are conducting an operational-level interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks along the frontlines in Donetsk Oblast on September 22.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks west of Hulyaipole on September 22 and continued routine strikes throughout western Zaporizhzhia Oblast.
- Russian occupation forces are hurriedly setting conditions to hold sham annexation referenda across occupied Ukraine from September 23-27.

- Russian officials created polling stations in parts of Russia, ostensibly to enable displaced (in many cases meaning kidnapped) Ukrainian residents of occupied territories to “vote.”
- Russian occupation officials in Ukraine likely expect to be forced to provide personnel to meet Russian regional mobilization quotas after the Kremlin annexes occupied Ukrainian territories.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 21

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Mason Clark, Kat Lawlor, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 21, 9:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s announcement of “partial mobilization” on September 21 reflected many problems Russia faces in its faltering invasion of Ukraine that Moscow is unlikely to be able to resolve in the coming months.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin’s order to mobilize part of Russia’s “trained” reserve, that is, individuals who have completed their mandatory conscript service, will not generate significant usable Russian combat power for months. It may suffice to sustain the current levels of Russian military manpower in 2023 by offsetting Russian casualties, although even that is not yet clear. It will occur in deliberate phases, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said in an interview on September 21, likely precluding any sudden influx of Russian forces that could dramatically shift the tide of the war.<sup>[2]</sup> Russia’s partial mobilization will thus not deprive Ukraine of the opportunity to liberate more of its occupied territory into and through the winter.

**Putin and Shoigu emphatically said that only reservists who have completed their initial military service will be mobilized, making clear that Russia will not be expanding conscription.** Shoigu also declared that students will not be affected and told them to go about their studies without concern.<sup>[3]</sup> These comments were clearly intended to allay fears among the Russian population that “partial mobilization” was code for general conscription.

**It is not clear how much of the Russian reserve has already been deployed to fight in Ukraine.** Western intelligence officials reportedly said in November 2021 that Russia had called up “tens of thousands of reservists” as part of its pre-war mobilization.<sup>[4]</sup> Ukrainian military officials reported in June 2022 that Russian forces had committed 80,000 members of the mobilized reserve to fight in Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> The Russian military likely called up the most combat-ready reserves in that pre-war mobilization effort, which suggests that the current partial mobilization will begin by drawing on less combat-ready personnel from the outset.

**Russian reserves are poorly trained to begin with and receive no refresher training once their conscription period is completed.** Russian mandatory military service is only one year, which gives conscripts little time to learn how to be soldiers, to begin with. The absence of refresher training after that initial period accelerates the degradation of learned soldier skills over time. Shoigu referred to the intent of calling up reservists with “combat experience,” but very few Russian reservists other than those now serving in Ukraine have any combat experience.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Reports conflict regarding how much training reservists called up in the partial mobilization will receive.** Shoigu described a deliberate training process that would familiarize or re-familiarize mobilized reservists with crew, team, detachment, and then platoon-level operations before deploying them to fight. That process should take weeks, if not months, to bring reservists from civilian life to war readiness. Federation Council Committee on Defense and Security head Viktor Bondarev reportedly said that mobilized reservists would train for over a month before being deployed.<sup>[7]</sup> A military commissariat in Kursk Oblast, on the other hand, reportedly announced that reservists under 30 would deploy immediately with no additional training.<sup>[8]</sup>

**Putin emphatically did not say that the Russian nuclear umbrella would cover annexed areas of Ukraine nor did he tie mobilization to the annexation.** He addressed partial mobilization, annexation referenda in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine, and the possibility of nuclear war in his speech—but as separate topics rather than a coherent whole. The fact that he mentioned all three topics in a single

speech was clearly meant to suggest a linkage, but he went out of his way to avoid making any such linkage explicit.

Putin framed his comments about the possibility of Russian nuclear weapons use in the context of supposed Western threats to use nuclear weapons against Russia. He claimed that Western officials were talking about “the possibility and permissibility of using weapons of mass destruction—nuclear weapons—against Russia.” He continued, “I wish to remind those who allow themselves such statements about Russia that our country also has various means of attack...” His comment on this topic concludes by noting that Russia would use all means at its disposal in response to a threat to “the territorial integrity of our country, for the defense of Russia and our people.” That comment could be interpreted as applying in advance to the soon-to-be annexed areas of occupied Ukraine, but its placement in the speech and context do not by any means make such an interpretation obvious. Nor is Putin’s language in making this comment different from formal Kremlin policy or from previous statements by Russian officials. **Putin’s speech should not be read as an explicit threat that Russia would use nuclear weapons against Ukraine if Ukraine continues counter-offensives against occupied territories after annexation.** Putin did not connect annexation with the partial mobilization either, defending the need for partial mobilization by referring to the length of the lines along which Russian forces are now fighting and Western assistance to Ukraine. He noted that the front lines now stretch for more than a thousand kilometers to explain why more Russian forces are needed. He and Shoigu also heavily emphasized the false narrative that Russia is fighting not Ukraine but NATO and the West. This narrative is not new. It is not even markedly different from the initial false justifications Putin offered before ordering the invasion in February.<sup>[9]</sup> The formal Kremlin position has long been that NATO was pushing Ukraine to war with Russia, that NATO was preparing to give Ukraine nuclear weapons, and that NATO forces were taking up or preparing to take up positions in Ukraine. Putin’s and Shoigu’s repetitions of that line do not reflect an escalation in their rhetoric.

**Russia’s partial mobilization will not transform the war this year and may or may not have a significant impact on Russia’s ability to continue operations at their current level next year.** Ukraine and the West should neither dismiss it nor exaggerate it.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian President Vladimir Putin’s announced “partial mobilization” will not materially affect the course of the war in the coming months.
- Putin did *not* explicitly threaten to use nuclear weapons if Ukraine continues counter-offensive operations to liberate occupied areas after Russian annexation.
- Ukrainian forces likely continued offensive operations around Lyman.
- Ukrainian forces conducted strikes north and east of Kherson City as part of an operational-level interdiction campaign against Russian logistics, military, and transportation assets in Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources identified three areas of kinetic activity on September 21: northwest of Kherson City, near the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River, and south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border around Vysokopillya.
- Russian federal subjects (regions) are continuing crypto-mobilization efforts regardless of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s declaration of partial mobilization.
- Russian-appointed occupation administrators are likely increasing law enforcement and filtration measures in occupied areas of Ukraine in preparation for Russia’s sham annexation referenda.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 20

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 20, 8:45pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian-appointed occupation officials in Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts announced on September 20 that they will hold a “referendum” on acceding to Russia, with a vote

**taking place from September 23-27.**[1] The Kremlin will use the falsified results of these sham referenda to illegally annex all Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine and is likely to declare unoccupied parts of Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts to be part of Russia as well.

**The Kremlin's annexation plans are primarily targeting a domestic audience; Putin likely hopes to improve Russian force generation capabilities by calling on the Russian people to volunteer for a war to "defend" newly claimed Russian territory.** Putin and his advisors have apparently realized that current Russian forces are insufficient to conquer Ukraine and that efforts to build large forces quickly through voluntary mobilization are culminating short of the Russian military's force requirements. Putin is therefore likely setting legal and informational conditions to improve Russian force generation without resorting to expanded conscription by changing the balance of carrots and sticks the Kremlin has been using to spur voluntary recruitment.

**Putin may believe that he can appeal to Russian ethnonationalism and the defense of purportedly "Russian peoples" and claimed Russian land to generate additional volunteer forces.** He may seek to rely on enhanced rhetoric in part because the Kremlin cannot afford the service incentives, like bonuses and employment benefits, that it has already promised Russian recruits.[2] But Putin is also adding new and harsher punishments in an effort to contain the risk of the collapse of Russian military units fighting in Ukraine and draft-dodging within Russia. The Kremlin rushed the passage of a new law through the State Duma on September 20, circumventing normal parliamentary procedures.[3] This law codifies dramatically increased penalties for desertion, refusing conscription orders, and insubordination. It also criminalizes voluntary surrender and makes surrender a crime punishable by ten years in prison. **The law notably does not order full-scale mobilization or broader conscription or make any preparations for such activities.**

**ISW has observed no evidence that the Kremlin is imminently intending to change its conscription practices. The Kremlin's new law is about strengthening the Kremlin's coercive volunteerism, or what Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov called "self-mobilization."**[4]

The Kremlin is taking steps to directly increase force generation through continued voluntary self-mobilization and an expansion of its legal authority to deploy Russian conscripts already with the force to fight in Ukraine.

- **Putin's illegal annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory will broaden the domestic legal definition of "Russian" territory under Russian law, enabling the Russian military to legally and openly deploy conscripts already in the Russian military to fight in eastern and southern Ukraine.** Russian leadership has already deployed undertrained conscripts to Ukraine in direct violation of Russian law and faced domestic backlash.[5] Russia's semi-annual conscription cycle usually generates around 130,000 conscripts twice per year.[6] The next cycle runs from October 1 to December 31. Russian law generally requires that conscripts receive at least four months of training prior to deployment overseas, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly denied that conscripts will be deployed to Ukraine.[7] Annexation could provide him a legal loophole allowing for the overt deployment of conscripts to fight.
- **Russian-appointed occupation officials in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts announced the formation of "volunteer" units to fight with the Russian military against Ukraine.**[8] Russian forces will likely coerce or physically force at least some Ukrainian men in occupied areas to fight in these units, as they have done in the territories of the Russian proxy Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR).
- **The Russian State Duma separately passed new incentives for foreign nationals to fight in Russia's military to obtain Russian citizenship and will likely increase overseas recruitment accordingly.**[9] That new law, which deputies also rushed through normal procedures on September 20, allows foreign nationals to gain Russian citizenship by signing a contract and serving in the Russian military for one year. Russian law previously required three years of service to apply for citizenship.
- **Putin's appeals to nationalism may generate small increases in volunteer recruitment from within Russia and parts of occupied Donetsk and Luhansk.** However, forces generated from such volunteers, if they manifest, will be small and poorly trained. Most eager and able-bodied Russian men and Ukrainian collaborators have likely already volunteered in one of the earlier recruitment phases.

- Local Russian administrators will continue to attempt to form volunteer units, with decreasing effect, as ISW has previously reported and mapped.[10]
- Russian forces and the Wagner Private Military Company are also directly recruiting from Russian prisons, as ISW has previously reported.[11] These troops will be undisciplined and unlikely to meaningfully increase Russian combat power.

**Putin likely hopes that increasing self-mobilization, and cracking down on unwilling Russian forces, will enable him to take the rest of Donetsk and defend Russian-occupied parts of Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts. He is mistaken.** Putin has neither the time nor the resources needed to generate effective combat power. But Putin will likely wait to see if these efforts are successful before either escalating further or blaming his loss on a scapegoat. His most likely scapegoat is Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and the Russian Ministry of Defense. Reports that Shoigu would accompany Putin while Putin gave a speech announced and then postponed on September 20 suggest that Putin intended to make Shoigu the face of the current effort.[12]

**Russian President Vladimir Putin likely also intends to deter Ukraine's ongoing counteroffensives by annexing occupied Ukrainian territory and framing Ukrainian attempts to liberate occupied territory as attacks on Russia.** Russian officials and propagandists such as Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev issued vague warnings on September 20 that "the infringement of Russian territory is a crime; committing this crime permits using all means of self-defense." [13] Russian officials are demonstrably panicked over Ukrainian advances, as ISW assessed on September 19.[14] The Kremlin likely intends these vague warnings to exacerbate Ukrainian and global fears of nuclear escalation. However, Putin has already declined to enforce any territory-specific redlines in response to Ukrainian attacks on Russian-annexed Crimea, occupied territory he has controlled for eight years and declares to be Russian.

Ukrainian and Western leaders responded to reports of the impending referenda with renewed declarations of commitment to restoring Ukrainian sovereignty over occupied Ukrainian territory. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba stated on September 20 that "sham 'referendums' will not change anything ... Ukraine has every right to liberate its territories and will keep liberating them whatever Russia has to say." [15] NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on September 20 that "[sham referendums] will only further worsen the situation, and therefore we need to provide more support to Ukraine." [16] US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on September 20 that the United States "will never recognize this territory as anything other than a part of Ukraine" and will continue to provide "historic support" to Ukraine. [17] German Chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasized on September 19 that "Ukraine has every right to defend the sovereignty and integrity of its own territory and its own democracy." [18] French President Emmanuel Macron called the sham referenda a "parody" and a "provocation."

### Key Takeaways

- Russian-appointed occupation officials in Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts announced on September 20 that they will hold a "referendum" on acceding to Russia, with a vote taking place from September 23-27.
- The Kremlin's annexation plans are primarily targeting a domestic audience; Putin likely intends to improve Russian force generation capabilities by calling on the Russian people to volunteer for a war ostensibly to defend newly-claimed Russian territory.
- Ukrainian forces continued disrupting ongoing Russian efforts to reestablish ground lines of communications (GLOCs) across the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces are likely targeting Ukrainian hydrotechnical infrastructure in Kharkiv and Luhansk oblasts to threaten Ukrainian positions along the Siverskyi Donets River.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks in Donetsk Oblast on September 20.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks west of Hulyaipole on September 20 and continued routine artillery strikes throughout Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian forces continue to degrade their force generation capabilities by cannibalizing training elements to fight in combat formations in Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 19

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, Mason Clark, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 19, 9 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Urgent discussion on September 19 among Russia's proxies of the need for Russia to immediately annex Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (much of the latter of which is not under Russian control) suggests that Ukraine's ongoing northern counter-offensive is panicking proxy forces and some Kremlin decision-makers. The legislatures of Russia's proxies in occupied Ukraine, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR), each called on their leadership to "immediately" hold a referendum on recognizing the DNR and LNR as Russian subjects.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian propagandist and *RT* Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan spoke glowingly of the call, referring to it as the "Crimean scenario." She wrote that by recognizing occupied Ukrainian land as Russian territory, Russia could more easily threaten NATO with retaliatory strikes for Ukrainian counterattacks, "untying Russia's hands in all respects."<sup>[2]</sup>

This approach is incoherent. Russian forces do not control all of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Annexing the claimed territories of the DNR and LNR would, therefore, have Russia annex oblasts that would be by Kremlin definition partially "occupied" by legitimate Ukrainian authorities and advancing Ukrainian forces. Ukrainian strikes into Russian-annexed Crimea clearly demonstrate that Ukrainian attacks on Russia's illegally annexed territory do not automatically trigger Russian retaliation against NATO, as Simonyan would have her readers believe. **Partial annexation at this stage would also place the Kremlin in the strange position of demanding that Ukrainian forces un-occupy "Russian" territory, and the humiliating position of being unable to enforce that demand. It remains very unclear that Russian President Vladimir Putin would be willing to place himself in such a bind for the dubious benefit of making it easier to threaten NATO or Ukraine with escalation he remains highly unlikely to conduct at this stage.**

Russian leadership may be running out of ways to try to stop Ukrainian forces as they advance across the Oskil River in Luhansk Oblast. The Kremlin may believe that partial annexation could drive recruitment of additional forces, both from within Russia and from within newly annexed Ukrainian territory. Russian forces are desperately attempting to mobilize additional forces from all potential sources to backfill their heavily degraded and demoralized units but have proven unable to generate significant combat power, as ISW has repeatedly written.<sup>[3]</sup>

This latest annexation discussion also omits other parts of Russian-occupied southern Ukraine in which the Kremlin was previously planning sham annexation referenda. A willingness to abandon the promise to bring all the occupied areas into Russia at the same time would be a significant retreat for Putin to make in the eyes of the hardline pro-war groups he appears to be courting. It remains to be seen if he is willing to compromise himself internally in such a fashion. The Kremlin's proxies in Donbas regularly outpace Kremlin messaging, on the other hand, and may have done so again as they scramble to retain their occupied territory in the face of Ukraine's successful and ongoing counter-offensive.

**Recent Ukrainian counter-offensive successes are further reducing the already poor morale among Russian units that had been considered elite before February 24.** Independent Belarusian media outlet *Vot Tak* posted images of intercepted documents left behind by Russian soldiers of Unit 31135 of the 1st Motorized Rifle Regiment of the 2nd Guards Motor Rifle Division as they fled Izyum en masse.<sup>[4]</sup> The signed documents (dated to August 30, prior to Ukraine's counter-offensive in Kharkiv on September 7) include written pleas to commanders of Unit 31135 to dismiss the letters' authors due to persistent "physical and moral fatigue."<sup>[5]</sup> Ukrainian intelligence claimed that 90% of the personnel of the 1st Motorized Rifle Regiment wrote damning reports on the state of morale as early as May 23, 2022.<sup>[6]</sup> The 2nd Guards Motor Rifle Division is one of three divisions of the 1st Guards Tank Army, which, prior to the current war in Ukraine, was considered Russia's premier mechanized force and was to be Russia's key force in a large-scale conventional war with NATO.<sup>[7]</sup> **The intercepted letters indicate pervasive morale issues among Russia's most elite units and the degradation of Russia's conventional capabilities against NATO.**

**Key Takeaways**

- Urgent discussion on September 19 among Russia's proxies of the need for Russia to immediately annex Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (much of the latter of which are not under Russian control) suggests that Ukraine's ongoing northern counter-offensive is panicking proxy forces and some Kremlin decision-makers.
- Ukrainian counter-offensive successes are degrading morale among Russian units that were regarded as elite prior to the invasion of Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces are likely continuing limited and localized offensive operations across the Oskil River and along the Lyman-Yampil-Bilohorivka line.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks south of Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces are continuing to strike Russian military, transportation, and logistics assets in Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian and Russian sources identified three areas of kinetic activity on September 19: northwest of Kherson City, near the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River, and in northern Kherson Oblast near Olhine.
- The size of volunteer units Russia can generate is likely decreasing.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 18

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 18, 9:35 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is increasingly relying on irregular volunteer and proxy forces rather than conventional units and formations of the Russian Federation Armed Forces. ISW has previously reported that Putin has been bypassing the Russian higher military command and Ministry of Defense leadership throughout the summer and especially following the defeat around Kharkiv Oblast.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin's souring relationship with the military command and the Russian (MoD) may explain in part the Kremlin's increasing focus on recruiting ill-prepared volunteers into ad-hoc irregular units rather than attempting to draw them into reserve or replacement pools for regular Russian combat units. A prominent Russian milblogger reported that Russian forces have "already began the process of forming and staffing the 4th Army Corps, at least on a documentation level."<sup>[2]</sup> The report may be true given the recent Russia-wide push for the formation of more regional volunteer units among the Kremlin representatives following the Russian defeat around Kharkiv Oblast.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian federal subjects had previously begun advertising for contract service in volunteer units around the time of the formation of the 3rd Army Corps.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian forces are also increasingly recruiting prisoners, involving Cossack units, deploying elements of Russian security services such as the Russian Federal Security Service and Rosgvardia, and covertly mobilizing men from occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. The continued focus on the formation of irregular units is receiving some criticism from retired Russian officers who are calling for proper conventional divisions rather than volunteer battalions.<sup>[5]</sup>

**The formation of such ad-hoc units will lead to further tensions, inequality, and an overall lack of cohesiveness between forces.** Ukrainian and Russian sources have reported instances of Russian Armed Forces refusing to pay veteran benefits, one-time enlistment bonuses, or provide medical treatment to BARS (Russian Combat Army Reserve) servicemen.<sup>[6]</sup> Some military formations offer financial incentives for every kilometer that the serviceman's unit advances, an incentive that few soldiers will likely benefit from considering that Russian forces are on the defensive almost everywhere apart from the areas around Bakhmut and Donetsk City, where gains have been slow and very limited.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian opposition publication *Insider* reported instances of ethnic discrimination within Chechen units, noting that the Chechen leadership deploys non-Chechens to the frontlines before committing Chechens to the battle.<sup>[8]</sup> Professional military staff are likely to confront behavioral issues among recruited prisoners, especially considering the likely prevalence of prisoners convicted of violent crimes, narcotics, and rape. The Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics (LNR and DNR) have both previously refused to fight for each other's territory.<sup>[9]</sup> All these groups have different levels of military training, decentralized command

structures, and different perceptions of the war and motivations to fight, which makes conflict and poor unit coordination more probable. The one thing they have in common is wholly inadequate training and preparation for combat.

**The formation of irregular, hastily-trained units adds little effective combat power to Russian forces fighting in Ukraine.** *Forbes* noted that the 3rd Army Corps rushed in to defend Russian positions around Kharkiv Oblast during the counteroffensive but failed to make any difference and “melted away.”[10] The reported arrival of increasing numbers of irregular Russian forces on the battlefield has had little to no impact on Russian operations.

**Russian forces are likely attempting to conduct a more deliberate and controlled withdrawal in western Kherson Oblast to avoid the chaotic flight that characterized the collapse of Russian defensive positions in Kharkiv Oblast earlier this month.** The Russians have heavily reinforced western Kherson Oblast over the past several months including with airborne units and at least some elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army.[11] These ostensibly more professional and well-trained and equipped units are concentrated in a small area in Kherson Oblast and were prepared for the expected counteroffensive. They appear to be performing significantly better than Russian forces in Kharkiv Oblast. The Ukrainians destroyed a number of units of the 1st Guards Tank Army in Kharkiv Oblast, putting them to flight and capturing large amounts of high-quality equipment. The worse performance of professional Russian soldiers in Kharkiv Oblast compared with those in Kherson Oblast may be due to the thinner concentration of Russian forces in Kharkiv Oblast as well as the fact that the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast appeared to surprise the Russian defenders.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast is nevertheless making progress, and Russian forces appear to be attempting to slow it and fall back to more defensible positions rather than stop it cold or reverse it. Continuous Ukrainian attacks on Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) across the Dnipro River to western Kherson Oblast appear to be having increasing effects on Russian supplies on the right bank—recent reports indicate shortages of food and water in Russian-occupied Kherson City and at least a temporary slackening of Russian artillery fire. Poor-quality proxy units have collapsed in some sectors of the Russian front lines, moreover, allowing Ukrainian advances. Ukrainian forces remain likely to regain much if not all of western Kherson Oblast in the coming weeks if they continue to interdict Russian GLOCs and press their advance. Ukrainian gains may continue to be slow if the Russian troops can retain their coherence but could also accelerate significantly if Russian forces begin to break.

**A prominent Russian milblogger also claimed that the Russian command issued a “no retreat” order last week for all units serving in Donbas, requiring that Russian forces operating on the axis hold their positions regardless of the unfolding situation in front of them.[12]** This order would be noteworthy in two ways if the report is accurate. First, Donetsk Oblast is the only area in Ukraine in which Russian forces are still attempting offensive operations. There have been sporadic reports of limited Ukrainian counterattacks, but no evidence that Ukraine is preparing a large-scale counteroffensive operation in this area.[13] The order suggests that the Russian military may fear a Ukrainian counteroffensive into the teeth of their last offensive efforts, however. Second, it shows deep mistrust of the combat capabilities of the units receiving the order in contrast with the apparently higher confidence Russian commanders have in the units in western Kherson Oblast, where sensible efforts to conduct a controlled withdrawal appear to prevail.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to be increasingly relying on irregular, poorly trained ad-hoc volunteer and proxy units rather than attempting to rebuild damaged or destroyed conventional Russian ground forces units.**
- **Ukrainian forces continue to consolidate positions on the east bank of the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast despite Russian efforts to contain them.**
- **Russian forces in western Kherson Oblast may be attempting to fall back to more defensible positions in a controlled withdrawal to avoid the chaotic retreat that characterized the collapse of Russian defenses in Kharkiv earlier in September.**
- **Russian forces suffered devastating losses of manpower and equipment in their fight for eastern Ukraine and especially during the Ukrainian Kharkiv counter-offensive. Multiple Russian armored and mechanized units have likely been effectively destroyed according to assessments released on September 18.**

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 17, 9:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces continue to conduct meaningless offensive operations around Donetsk City and Bakhmut instead of focusing on defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives that continue to advance.** Russian troops continue to attack Bakhmut and various villages near Donetsk City of emotional significance to pro-war residents of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) but little other importance. The Russians are apparently directing some of the very limited reserves available in Ukraine to these efforts rather than to the vulnerable Russian defensive lines hastily thrown up along the Oskil River in eastern Kharkiv Oblast. The Russians cannot hope to make gains around Bakhmut or Donetsk City on a large enough scale to derail Ukrainian counteroffensives and appear to be continuing an almost robotic effort to gain ground in Donetsk Oblast that seems increasingly divorced from the overall realities of the theater. **Russian failures to rush large-scale reinforcements to eastern Kharkiv and to Luhansk Oblasts leave most of Russian-occupied northeastern Ukraine highly vulnerable to continuing Ukrainian counter-offensives.** The Russians may have decided not to defend this area, despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's repeated declarations that the purpose of the "special military operation" is to "liberate" Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Prioritizing the defense of Russian gains in southern Ukraine over holding northeastern Ukraine makes strategic sense since Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts are critical terrain for both Russia and Ukraine whereas the sparsely-populated agricultural areas in the northeast are much less so. But the continued Russian offensive operations around Bakhmut and Donetsk City, which are using some of Russia's very limited effective combat power at the expense of defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives, might indicate that Russian theater decision-making remains questionable.

**Ukrainian forces appear to be expanding positions east of the Oskil River and north of the Siverskyi Donets River that could allow them to envelop Russian troops holding around Lyman.** Further Ukrainian advances east along the north bank of the Siverskyi Donets River could make Russian positions around Lyman untenable and open the approaches to Lysychansk and ultimately Severodonetsk. The Russian defenders in Lyman still appear to consist in large part of BARS (Russian Combat Army Reserve) reservists and the remnants of units badly damaged in the Kharkiv Oblast counteroffensive, and the Russians do not appear to be directing reinforcements from elsewhere in the theater to these areas.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces continue to prioritize strategically meaningless offensive operations around Donetsk City and Bakhmut over defending against continued Ukrainian counter-offensive operations in Kharkiv Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces liberated a settlement southwest of Lyman and are likely continuing to expand their positions in the area.
- Ukrainian forces continued to conduct an interdiction campaign in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces continued to conduct unsuccessful assaults around Bakhmut and Avdiivka.
- Ukrainian sources reported extensive partisan attacks on Russian military assets and logistics in southern Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Russian officials continued to undertake crypto-mobilization measures to generate forces for war Russian war efforts.
- Russian authorities are working to place 125 "orphan" Ukrainian children from occupied Donetsk Oblast with Russian families.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 16

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, Mason Clark, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 16, 8pm ET

**The revelations of mass graves of civilians and torture chambers in newly liberated Izyum confirm ISW's previous assessments that the Bucha atrocities were not isolated war crimes but rather a microcosm of Russian atrocities throughout Russian-occupied areas.** The Ukrainian General Staff published images on September 16 showing a mass burial site in Izyum, Kharkiv Oblast and noting that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that the site contained more than 400 bodies showing signs of torture and brutality.<sup>[1]</sup> The Ukrainian Ministry of Reintegration reported that the number of war crimes victims in Izyum may exceed those of Bucha.<sup>[2]</sup> The head of Ukraine's National Police, Ihor Klymenko, stated that Ukrainian officials have found 10 Russian torture chambers in Vovchansk, Kupyansk, Balaklia, and Izyum.<sup>[3]</sup> One torture chamber was reportedly located in the Balakliya police department, where "Russians wore masks and tortured civilians with bare electric wires," according to Andriy Nebytov, the head of the National Police Main Directorate in the Kyiv region.<sup>[4]</sup>

ISW Non-Resident Fellow Nataliya Bugayova had warned in April 2022 that "Bucha is an observable microcosm of a deliberate Russian terror campaign against Ukrainians. Similar intentional atrocities are happening throughout Russian-occupied areas in Ukraine."<sup>[5]</sup> Ukrainian officials will likely continue to find evidence of Russian war crimes and atrocities as Ukrainian forces liberate occupied areas.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin appeared to threaten increased attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure if reported Ukrainian attacks on Russian military positions in Russian Federation territory continue.** Putin said that Russia has been "rather restrained in our response" to Ukrainian "terrorist acts [and] attempts to damage our civilian [sic] infrastructure" in a question-and-answer session with reporters following the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting on September 16.<sup>[6]</sup> He continued "more recently, the Russian armed forces have dealt a couple of sensitive blows" that are "warning shots," and threatened that more serious attacks could follow. Putin did not explicitly refer to the reported Ukrainian strikes on the base of the Russian 3<sup>rd</sup> Motorized Rifle Division near Valuyki that occurred on September 16, nor did he make clear which Russian actions he was referring to. But Russian forces have increased attacks on civilian infrastructure throughout Ukraine over the past several weeks as Russian media personalities increase explicit calls for such attacks.<sup>[7]</sup>

Putin's comments are likely in part a response to criticism by Russian milbloggers, who attacked the Kremlin for failing to protect Russian territory and for failing to respond adequately. One milblogger asked if the Kremlin still regards Belgorod Oblast as part of Russia, part of the "special military operation" zone, or part of Ukraine.<sup>[8]</sup> Another blamed the reported Ukrainian attack on Valuyki on the so-called "regrouping" of Russian forces (referring to the initial language the Russian Ministry of Defense used to describe the rout of Russian forces in Kharkiv Oblast) and warned that another "regrouping" could allow Ukrainian forces to attack other critical Russian areas.<sup>[9]</sup> Putin has increasingly shown a determination to appease the milbloggers and the constituencies they speak to and on behalf of, even at the expense of the uniformed Russian military and the Russian Ministry of Defense.

**The Ukrainian Resistance Center warned on September 16 that Russian forces are planning to conduct false flag attacks against civilian population in Russian-occupied Ukraine and urged Ukrainians in occupied areas to avoid public places between September 17 and September 20.**<sup>[10]</sup>

**[10]** The Resistance Center suggested that such false flag attacks could be attempts to "divert the attention of the world community from the defeat in Kharkiv and the discovery of Russian war crimes" in liberated areas.

**Correction: ISW's 9/15/2022 update contained several errors. We mistakenly located the Kinburn Spit in Crimea rather than Kherson Oblast. We reported Ukrainian attacks northwest of Kharkiv City rather than Kherson City. And we reported Ukrainian operations continuing southwest of Izyum, near Lyman, instead of southeast of Izyum. We apologize for these errata, which have been corrected in the 9/15 update text.**

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The discovery of mass graves and torture chambers in liberated Izyum confirm previous ISW assessments that the Bucha atrocities were emblematic of Russian activities in occupied areas rather than an anomaly.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin apparently threatened to expand Russia's attacks on civilian Ukrainian infrastructure if Ukraine continues reported attacks on military facilities in Russia.
- The Ukrainian Resistance Center warned that Russian forces may conduct false flag attacks in occupied areas between September 17 and September 20.
- Ukrainian forces captured all of Kupyansk City on September 16, continuing offensive operations east of the Oskil River.

- Ukrainian forces reportedly shelled targets in Valuyki, Belgorod Oblast, Russia, overnight on September 15-16.
- Ukrainian forces struck Russia's occupation headquarters in Kherson, likely using HIMARS, and are continuing ground maneuvers in three areas of Kherson Oblast as part of the ongoing southern counteroffensive.
- Russian administrative officials are rallying around Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's call for "self-mobilization" at a local level to provide additional forces to the Russian military.
- Forced Russian mobilization campaigns are likely depleting male populations in parts of the claimed territory of the Russian proxy Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) along the front lines.
- Immediate and coordinated Russian information responses suggest that Ukrainian partisans may not be responsible for the September 16 assassination of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Prosecutor General and his deputy.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 15

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan  
September 15, 9:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces are continuing counteroffensive operations in eastern Ukraine, increasingly pressuring Russian positions and logistics lines in eastern Kharkiv, northern Luhansk, and eastern Donetsk oblasts.** Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces are continuing ground operations southwest of Izyum, near Lyman, and on the east bank of the Oskil River, reportedly compelling Russian forces to withdraw from some areas in eastern Ukraine and reinforce others.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian forces in eastern Ukraine will likely struggle to hold their defensive lines if Ukrainian forces continue to push farther east.

**The Kremlin is responding to the defeat around Kharkiv Oblast by doubling down on crypto-mobilization rather than setting conditions for general mobilization.** Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov called on all federal subjects to initiate "self-mobilization" and not wait on the Kremlin to declare martial law.<sup>[2]</sup> Kadyrov claimed that each federal subject must prove its readiness to help Russia by recruiting at least 1,000 servicemen instead of delivering speeches and conducting fruitless public events. Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan echoed the need for Russians to volunteer to join the war effort, and several loyalist Russian governors publicly supported Kadyrov's speech.<sup>[3]</sup> The Russian-appointed head of occupied Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, announced the formation of two volunteer battalions on the peninsula in support of Kadyrov's calls.<sup>[4]</sup>

**The defeat around Kharkiv Oblast prompted the Kremlin to announce a Russia-wide recruitment campaign.** Kremlin officials and state media had not previously made country-wide recruitment calls but had instead tasked local officials and outlets to generate forces ostensibly on their own initiative. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov vaguely welcomed the creation of the battalions on July 12, while 47 loyalist federal subjects advertised and funded the regional volunteer battalion recruitment campaign.<sup>[5]</sup> A prominent Russian milblogger and a supporter of general mobilization praised officials such as Kadyrov for taking the recruitment campaign from the ineffective Russian Ministry of Defense; this recruitment revamp is likely to secure more support for the Kremlin among nationalist figures who are increasingly critical of the Russian MoD, even if the drive does not generate large numbers of combat-effective troops.<sup>[6]</sup>

**The Kremlin has likely abandoned its efforts to shield select federal subjects from recruitment drives, which may increase social tensions.** ISW has previously reported that the Kremlin attempted to shield Moscow City residents from reports of the formation of the Moscow-based "Sobyaninsky Polk" volunteer regiment.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian opposition outlet *The Insider* noted that several groups in the republics of Buryatia, Kalmykia, Tyva, and Yakutia (Republic of Sakha) are publicly opposed to the Kremlin's emphasis on recruitment on an ethnic basis.<sup>[8]</sup> Simonyan's statement about "self-mobilization" prompted numerous negative comments among Russians calling on Russian oligarchs to pay for and fight in the war.<sup>[9]</sup>

**The Kremlin has almost certainly drained a large proportion of the forces originally stationed in Russian bases in former Soviet states since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February, likely weakening Russian influence in those states.** A Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) investigation reported on September 14 that the Russian military has already deployed approximately 1500 Russian personnel from Russia's 201st Military Base in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, to Ukraine since the full-scale invasion began and plans to deploy 600 more personnel from facilities in Dushanbe and Bokhatar, a southern Tajik city, in the future.[10] RFE/RL additionally reported on September 13 that Russia has likely redeployed approximately 300 Tuvan troops from the Russian Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan to fight in Ukraine at varying points since late 2021.[11]

The withdrawals from the Central Asian states are noteworthy in the context of border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Tajik and Kyrgyz border guards exchanged fire in three separate incidents on September 14, killing at least two people.[12] The uptick in violence between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, both of which are members of the Russian-controlled Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), comes alongside renewed aggression by Azerbaijan against CSTO member state Armenia. Russian forces also withdrew 800 personnel from Armenia early in the war to replenish losses in Ukraine, as ISW has previously reported.[13]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in eastern Ukraine.**
- **The Kremlin is responding to the defeat around Kharkiv Oblast by doubling down on crypto-mobilization, rather than setting conditions for general mobilization.**
- **The Kremlin has almost certainly drained a large proportion of the forces originally at Russian bases in former Soviet states since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February, likely weakening Russian influence in those states.**
- **Russian and Ukrainian sources reported Ukrainian ground attacks northwest of Kharkiv City, near the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River, and south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border.**
- **Russian-appointed occupation officials and milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a landing at the Kinsburn Spit (a narrow peninsula of the Crimean Peninsula).**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground assaults and are reinforcing positions on the Eastern Axis.**
- **The Russian proxy Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) is likely attempting to stop its administrators from fleeing ahead of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, demonstrating the bureaucratic fragility of the DNR.**

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 14**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan  
September 14, 8:15pm ET

**Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.**

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is being established as the face of the Russian "special military operation" in Ukraine. Prigozhin gave a recruitment speech on September 14 announcing that Russian prisoners have been participating in the war since July 1 when they were instrumental in seizing the Vuhlehirskaya Thermal Power Plant.[1] A Russian milblogger noted that Prigozhin is introducing a "Stalinist" method that allows the Kremlin to avoid ordering a general mobilization that could ignite social tensions in Russian society.[2] Milbloggers have been consistently praising Prigozhin's success in Ukraine and some even said that he should replace the Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, whom milbloggers and Kremlin pundits blame for the Russian defeat around Kharkiv Oblast.[3] Russian military correspondent and milblogger Maksim Fomin (alias Vladlen Tatarsky) claimed to have spoken to Prigozhin about the situation on the Ukrainian-Russian border after the withdrawal of Russian forces in the area.[4] The Prigozhin-Fomin meeting, if it occurred, could indicate that the Kremlin is attempting to address milbloggers' months-long complaints that the Russian Defense

Ministry did not hear their criticism highlighting the ineffectiveness of Russian higher command. Prigozhin is Putin's close confidant, and his developing relationship with milbloggers may help retain milblogger support for the Kremlin's war effort while scapegoating Shoigu and the Russian Defense Ministry for the defeat around Kharkiv Oblast. ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin has changed its information approach to address the demands of the Russian milbloggers and nationalists', suggesting that Putin seeks to win back the critical milblogger community alienated by Russian failures.[5]

**Russian forces likely targeted Ukrainian hydrotechnical infrastructure in western Dnipropetrovsk Oblast on September 14 to interfere with Ukrainian operations across the Inhulets River.** Ukrainian sources reported that eight Russian cruise missiles struck unspecified targets in Kryvyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, and caused extensive flooding in areas of Kryvyi Rih.[6] Russian sources identified the target location as the Karachun Dam, which sits along the Inhulets River on the western outskirts of Kryvyi Rih.[7] Footage of the aftermath of the strike shows a 2.5m increase in the water level of the Inhulets River, which runs south of Kryvyi Rih and is an important geographical feature for the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive along the Kherson-Mykolaiv border.[8] Russian forces likely targeted the Karachun Dam to damage Ukrainian pontoon bridges further downstream, especially in light of recent reports that Ukrainian troops are attempting to expand their bridgehead over the Inhulets River near Davydiv Brid as part of the ongoing Kherson counteroffensive.[9]

#### Key Takeaways

- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is being established as the face of the Russian "special military operation" in Ukraine.
- Russian forces likely targeted Ukrainian hydrotechnical infrastructure in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast in order to interfere with Ukraine's ability to operate across the Inhulets River
- The Ukrainian counteroffensive in eastern Kharkiv Oblast continues to degrade Russian forces and threaten Russian artillery and air defenses.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported Ukrainian ground attacks in northern Kherson Oblast, western Kherson Oblast, and northwest of Kherson City but did not report any major gains.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks around Bakhmut and northwest and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Funding volunteer battalions is likely placing financial strain on Russian cities and oblasts.
- Russian occupation authorities shut off mobile internet in occupied Luhansk Oblast on September 14, likely to preserve Russian operational security and better control the information environment as Russian forces, occupation officials, and collaborators flee newly-liberated Kharkiv Oblast for Russian and Russian-controlled territories.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 13

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan  
September 13, 10:15 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Kremlin acknowledged its defeat in Kharkiv Oblast, the first time Moscow has openly recognized a defeat since the start of the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Kremlin officials and state media propagandists are extensively discussing the reasons for the Russian defeat in Kharkiv Oblast, a marked change from their previous pattern of reporting on exaggerated or fabricated Russian successes with limited detail.[1] The Kremlin never admitted that Russia was defeated around Kyiv or, later, at Snake Island, framing the retreat from Kyiv as a decision to prioritize the "liberation" of Donbas and the withdrawal from Snake Island as a "gesture of goodwill." [2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) originally offered a similar explanation for the Russian failure in Kharkiv, claiming that Russian forces were withdrawing troops from Kharkiv Oblast to regroup, but this false narrative faced quick and loud criticism online.[3] The Kremlin's acknowledgment of the defeat is part of an effort to mitigate and deflect criticism for such a devastating failure away from Russian President Vladimir Putin and onto the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the uniformed military command.

**Kremlin sources are now working to clear Putin of any responsibility for the defeat, instead blaming the loss of almost all of occupied Kharkiv Oblast on underinformed military advisors within Putin's circle.[4]** One member of the Kremlin's Council for Interethnic Relations, Bogdan Bezpalko, even stated that military officials who had failed to see the concentration of Ukrainian troops and equipment and disregarded Telegram channels that warned of the imminent Ukrainian counter-offensive in Kharkiv Oblast should have their heads "lying on Putin's desk."<sup>[5]</sup> ISW has previously reported that the Kremlin delayed Putin's meeting with Russian defense officials immediately after the withdrawal of troops from around Kharkiv, increasing the appearance of a rift between the Kremlin and the Russian MoD.<sup>[6]</sup> The Kremlin's admission of defeat in Kharkiv shows that Putin is willing and able to recognize and even accept a Russian defeat at least in some circumstances and focus on deflecting blame from himself.

**Several members of the Russian State Duma expressed concern about the dire situation on the frontlines in Ukraine during the Duma's first plenary meeting of its autumn session on September 13.** Leader of the Russian Communist Party Gennady Zyuganov stated that Russia needs to announce full mobilization because the Russian "special military operation" is a war.<sup>[7]</sup> Zyuganov said that one can end a "special military operation" at any time, but that a war can end only in victory or defeat, and "we have no right to lose" this war. Leader of the "Fair Russia—For Truth" Party Sergey Mironov called for social "mobilization," in which regular Russians would pay attention more to the war in Ukraine, rather than for full military mobilization. Leader of the Russian Liberal Democratic Party Leonid Slutsky also noted that Russia will continue to fight in the geopolitical "scrum" with the West. All three MPs had publicly advocated for Putin to recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) before the February invasion and were instrumental in setting information conditions for the invasion itself.<sup>[8]</sup> The MPs also discussed a December date for the next hearing on a bill that will simplify the delivery of the semiannual conscription notices.<sup>[9]</sup> The bill, which is likely to pass, will allow Russian military recruitment centers to send out conscription notices via mail instead of presenting them in person and will oblige men who have not received a notice in the mail to show up at the local recruitment center anyway.<sup>[10]</sup>

**The Kremlin is likely seeking to use the defeat in Kharkiv to facilitate crypto mobilization efforts.** Zyuganov's, Mironov's, and Slutsky's statements could be aimed at raising concern and patriotism among Russians to encourage them to get more involved in the war. The bill could further facilitate the ongoing crypto mobilization campaign, which aims to promote recruitment into contract service via deception, coercion, or promised financial rewards. Recruitment centers throughout Russia have been delivering unofficial summonses that look like conscription notices via mail and phone calls, but many men are aware that Russian law requires military recruitment centers to issue conscription notices in person.<sup>[11]</sup> Russian men who have responded to the unofficial summonses have recounted recruiters attempting to persuade or pressure them into signing a military contract. The bill legalizing mailed conscription notices will facilitate this dishonest practice. Both the bill and MPs' statements may evoke fear of general mobilization among men, which could incentivize some to sign military contracts and receive financial bonuses for volunteering, as opposed to being conscripted and forced to serve without such compensation.

**Nothing in the Duma bill suggests that Putin is preparing to order general mobilization, and it is far from clear that he could do so quickly.** Large-scale conscription would very likely overwhelm the Russian MoD's ability to induct, train, and equip new soldiers, particularly since the Russian training base appears to be strained in preparing the limited numbers of volunteer battalions currently being fielded. Russia would likely first have to expand its training base significantly, a time-consuming process, and then find and prepare for combat sufficient equipment to kit out large numbers of new units before it could even begin to handle a large influx of new conscripts. Widely-reported Russian materiel shortages suggest deep failures in the Russian military industry that would make generating the necessary equipment, ammunition, and supplies for a large conscript army very difficult. ISW has not identified any indicators that preparations for such activities have been ordered or are underway.

**The Kremlin has adopted narratives that echo longstanding milblogger demands and complaints, suggesting that Putin seeks to appease and win back the critical milblogger community rather than censor it.** Russian milbloggers have long complained about the Russian MoD and the military high command, and now the Kremlin state media is openly expressing dissatisfaction with the progress of the war and the lack of situational awareness of events on the ground.<sup>[12]</sup> Milbloggers are advertising Telegram channels covering frontline developments 24/7 and urging readers to subscribe if they "believe"

in Putin.[13] Kremlin-controlled and Kremlin-influenced media are now openly calling for an intensive missile campaign against Ukrainian civilian critical infrastructure and transit routes, an idea with broad support among many milbloggers.[14] These new calls are a stark departure from the Kremlin's previous line claiming that Russian forces did not target civilian infrastructure, and this new narrative is earning the Kremlin public support among milbloggers. Slutsky's statement at the Duma meeting pointing to the disinterest of most Russian civilians in the war echoes frequent milblogger complaints about the harmful side effects of conducting a limited war.[15]

**Russia's defeat in Kharkiv Oblast is causing panic among Russians in occupied Ukrainian territories, servicemen, and milbloggers.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence (GUR) reported that Russian authorities in Crimea urged their families to flee to Russia, while employees of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) are selling their homes on the peninsula and are urgently evacuating their families due to Ukrainian counter-offensives.[16] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that forcibly mobilized proxy units are suffering low morale and psychological problems.[17] Russian milbloggers are increasingly worrying about Ukrainian counter-offensives in different areas along the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblasts frontline, and preemptively identifying vulnerable Russian positions.[18]

**Russia's military failures in Ukraine are likely continuing to weaken Russia's leverage in the former Soviet Union.** Armenia accused Azerbaijan of violating a Russian-brokered ceasefire and attacking Armenian forces along the Azerbaijan-Armenian border on September 13.[19] Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan held a call with Russian President Vladimir Putin and convened a meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states later in the day but did not invoke the CSTO's collective security agreement, according to government readouts of both meetings.[20] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not comment on whether the Kremlin would fulfill its CSTO obligations to Armenia if Azerbaijan continued to press its attack.[21] Russia's hedging approach may damage Russia's relationship with Armenia and with other CSTO member states, particularly if Russia cannot provide military or peacekeeping support.

The CSTO is a Russia-created and Russia-dominated intergovernmental military alliance that the Kremlin claims is about collective security, but typically uses to justify or further its hybrid war aims. The degraded Russian military likely does not have sufficient forces to enforce a ceasefire or to deploy additional peacekeepers to the area after six months of devastating war in Ukraine. ISW reported on March 13 that Russia pulled 800 personnel from Russia's base in Armenia and elements of its Nagorno-Karabakh "peacekeeping deployment" to replenish early losses in Ukraine.[22] ISW has observed no redeployments to Nagorno-Karabakh or Russia's base in Armenia since then.

### Key Takeaways

- The Kremlin has recognized its defeat in Kharkiv Oblast, the first defeat Russia has acknowledged in this war. The Kremlin is deflecting blame from Russian President Vladimir Putin and attributing it instead to his military advisors.
- The Kremlin is likely seeking to use the defeat in Kharkiv to facilitate crypto mobilization efforts by intensifying patriotic rhetoric and discussions about fuller mobilization while revisiting a Russian State Duma bill allowing the military to send call-ups for the regular semiannual conscription by mail. Nothing in the Duma bill suggests that Putin is preparing to order general mobilization, and it is far from clear that he could do so quickly in any case.
- The successful Ukrainian counter-offensive around Kharkiv Oblast is prompting Russian servicemen, occupation authorities, and milbloggers to panic.
- Russia's military failures in Ukraine are likely continuing to weaken Russia's leverage in the former Soviet Union as Russia appears unwilling to enforce a violated ceasefire it brokered between Armenia and Azerbaijan or to allow Armenia to invoke provisions of the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization in its defense.
- Ukrainian troops likely continued ground attacks along the Lyman-Yampil-Bilohorivka line in northern Donetsk Oblast and may be conducting limited ground attacks across the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources indicated that Ukrainian forces are continuing ground maneuvers in three areas of Kherson Oblast as part of the ongoing southern counter-offensive.

- Russian troops made incremental gains south of Bakhmut and continued ground attacks throughout Donetsk Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces provided the first visual evidence of Russian forces using an Iranian-made drone in Ukraine on September 13.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 12**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 12, 8:45pm ET

**[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.**

**Ukraine's southern counteroffensive is continuing to have significant impacts on Russian morale and military capabilities in southern Ukraine.** Satellite imagery of known Russian positions in Kyselivka, 15km northwest of Kherson City, shows that all but four Russian vehicles have departed from previous forward positions, consistent with rumors that Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) troops have abandoned Kyselivka and moved back towards the Dnipro River.<sup>[1]</sup> Kyselivka is an operationally significant location for Russian forces around Kherson City because it is the last major settlement along both the E58 highway and a railway line between current Ukrainian positions and Chornobaivka, the outermost part of Kherson City. The apparent withdrawal of Russian troops from this position may compromise the Russians' ability to defend the northwestern outskirts of Kherson City and suggests that Russian troops in this area perceive an imminent threat to their positions. Spokesperson for Ukraine's Southern Operational Command, Natalya Humenyuk, stated on September 12 that Russian forces located along the right bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast are attempting to negotiate for surrender under the auspices of international law.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian operations in Kharkiv Oblast are unlikely to have had such a dramatic psychological effect on Russian troops this far south, and both the withdrawal of troops from forward positions in Kyselivka and reports of surrender negotiations are indicators that Ukrainian counteroffensives in the south are progressing in a significant way, even if visibility on this axis is limited by the shift in focus to Kharkiv.

**The success of recent Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may be impacting the will or ability of the Russian military command to use newly formed volunteer units in Ukraine in a timely fashion.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Russian military command has suspended sending new, already-formed units to Ukraine due to recent Russian losses and widespread distrust of the Russian military command, factors which have caused a large number of volunteers to categorically refuse to participate in combat.<sup>[3]</sup> This assessment is still unconfirmed, but low morale due to Ukrainian counteroffensive success may prove devastating to the Kremlin's already-poor ability to generate meaningful combat capability. The deployment of these newly formed units to reinforce defensive lines against Ukrainian counteroffensives would be an operationally-sound decision on the part of Russian military leadership; and the delay or potential suspension of these deployments will afford Ukrainian troops time to consolidate and then resume the offensive, should they choose to do so, without having to face newly arrived and fresh (albeit undertrained and understrength) units.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian forces are continuing to make impactful gains in Kherson Oblast and are steadily degrading the morale and combat capabilities of Russian forces in this area.
- The Russian military command may be suspending the deployment of newly formed units to Ukraine due to recent Russian losses and overall degraded morale.
- Russian forces are failing to reinforce the new frontline following Ukrainian gains in eastern Kharkiv Oblast and are actively fleeing the area or redeploying to other axes.
- Ukrainian forces continued targeting Russian military assets and positions in Kherson Oblast, likely steadily degrading them.
- The Ukrainian recapture of Izyum has likely degraded Russian forces' ability to conduct artillery strikes along the Izyum-Sloviansk highway.
- The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced the restoration of the second reserve power transmission line to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).

- Ukraine's sweeping counteroffensive is damaging Russian administrative capabilities and driving Russian departures from occupied parts of Ukraine far behind the line of contact.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 10

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Angela Howard, and Mason Clark

September 10, 11:30pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast is routing Russian forces and collapsing Russia's northern Donbas axis.** Russian forces are not conducting a controlled withdrawal and are hurriedly fleeing southeastern Kharkiv Oblast to escape encirclement around Izyum. Russian forces have previously weakened the northern Donbas axis by redeploying units from this area to Southern Ukraine, complicating efforts to slow the Ukrainian advance or at minimum deploy a covering force for the retreat. Ukrainian gains are not confined to the Izyum area; Ukrainian forces reportedly captured Velikiy Burluk on September 10, which would place Ukrainian forces within 15 kilometers of the international border.<sup>[1]</sup> **Ukrainian forces have penetrated Russian lines to a depth of up to 70 kilometers in some places and captured over 3,000 square kilometers of territory in the past five days since September 6 – more territory than Russian forces have captured in all their operations since April.** Ukrainian forces will likely capture the city of Izyum itself in the next 48 hours if they have not already done so. The liberation of Izyum would be the most significant Ukrainian military achievement since winning the Battle of Kyiv in March. It would eliminate the Russian advance in northwest Donetsk Oblast along the E40 highway that the Russian military sought to use to outflank Ukrainian positions along the Slovyansk – Kramatorsk line. A successful encirclement of Russian forces fleeing Izyum would result in the destruction or capture of significant Russian forces and exacerbate Russian manpower and morale issues. Russian war correspondents and milbloggers have also reported facing challenges when evacuating from Izyum, indicating Ukrainian forces are at least partially closing a cauldron in some areas.<sup>[2]</sup>

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced the withdrawal of troops from the Balakliya-Izyum line on September 10, falsely framing the retreat as a “regrouping” of forces to support Russian efforts in the Donetsk Oblast direction – mirroring the Kremlin’s false explanation for the Russian withdrawal after the Battle of Kyiv.**<sup>[3]</sup> The Russian MoD did not acknowledge Ukrainian successes around Kharkiv Oblast as the primary factor for the Russian retreat, and claimed that Russian military command has been carrying out a controlled withdrawal from the Balakliya-Izyum area for the past three days. The Russian MoD falsely claimed that Russian forces undertook a number of demonstrative actions and used artillery and aviation to ensure the safety of withdrawing Russian forces. These Russian statements have no relation to the situation on the ground.

**The Russian MoD’s inability to admit Russian failures in Kharkiv Oblast and effectively set information conditions is collapsing the Russian information space.** Kremlin-sponsored TV propagandists offered a wide range of confused explanations for Ukrainian successes ranging from justifications that Russian forces are fighting against the entire Western Bloc, to downplaying the importance of Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCS) in Kupyansk.<sup>[4]</sup> The Kremlin’s propagandists appeared unusually disorganized in their narratives, with some confirming the liberation of certain towns and others refuting such reports. Guest experts also were unable to reaffirm the hosts’ narratives that Ukrainian successes are not significant for the Donbas axis. Such programming may reveal the true progress of the Russian “special military operation” to the general Russian public that relies on state media and the Russian MoD for updates.

**The withdrawal announcement further alienated the Russian milblogger and Russian nationalist communities that support the Kremlin’s grandiose vision for capturing the entirety of Ukraine.** Russian milbloggers condemned the Russian MoD for remaining quiet, choosing self-isolation, and distorting situational awareness in Russia.<sup>[5]</sup> One milblogger even stated that the Russian MoD’s silence is a betrayal of Russian servicemen that fought and still fight in Ukraine.<sup>[6]</sup> A Russian milblogger also noted that the Russian MoD has repeatedly ignored or demeaned the milblogger community that raised concerns with Russian military leadership and lack of transparency on the frontlines.<sup>[7]</sup> The

milbloggers called on the Russian MoD to take the information space into its own hands and stop relying on silencing information.

Prior to the withdrawal announcement, the Russian MoD released footage of Russian military convoys reportedly moving to reinforce the Kharkiv direction on September 9.<sup>[8]</sup> Many Russian outlets and milbloggers expressed hope that these reinforcements would stabilize the frontline and repel Ukrainian advances on Izyum despite the Russian MoD failing to address the unfolding situation days prior. Russian milbloggers would have likely accepted MoD's announcement of a withdrawal like they previously did with the Russian retreat from the Snake Island and other tactical Russian losses if the Russian information space was not oversaturated with footage of Ukrainian successes. Such inconsistencies in messaging further support ISW's assessment that the Russian MoD faces challenges in responding to unexpected developments within the established informational framework, which portrays Russian invasion of Ukraine as an easy and faultless operation.<sup>[9]</sup> Most importantly, such unaware information practices erode the Russian public's trust in Russian MoD messaging and disrupt the Kremlin's propaganda facade.

**Russian milbloggers also criticized the Russian occupation authorities for failing to organize evacuation measures in Kharkiv Oblast.** Some milbloggers noted that occupation administrations are disoriented and lack initiative.<sup>[10]</sup> The Ukrainian counteroffensive is effectively paralyzing the Russian occupation leadership that is likely afraid for its fate.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces in Kharkiv Oblast are collapsing Russia's northern Donbas axis, and Ukrainian forces will likely recapture Izyum itself in the next 48 hours.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced the withdrawal of troops from the Balakliya-Izyum line on September 10, and the Russian MoD's failure to set effective information conditions is collapsing the Russian information space.
- The withdrawal announcement and occupation authorities' failure to organize evacuation measures is further alienating the Russian milblogger and Russian nationalist communities that support the Kremlin's grandiose vision of capturing the entirety of Ukraine.
- Ukrainian forces reached positions within 15–25km of the Russo-Ukrainian border in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast, Izyum's northern outskirts, and Lyman's south and southwestern outskirts, and captured the western half of Kupyansk.
- Russian forces are reinforcing frontline positions in Kherson Oblast while Ukrainian forces conduct positional battles and continue their interdiction campaign against Russian logistics lines.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground assaults north of Kharkiv City, south of Bakhmut, and west of Donetsk City.
- Russian recruitment drives are generating some criticism among Russian milbloggers and regions.
- Russian forces are reportedly intensifying filtration measures in Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts in response to Ukrainian counteroffensives on the Southern Axis.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 9

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

September 9, 11:15pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian forces have captured an estimated 2,500 square kilometers in Kharkiv Oblast in the Kharkiv area counteroffensive as of September 9.** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valery Zaluzhnyi stated on September 8 that Ukrainian forces liberated over 1,000 square kilometers between September 1-8 – a day before Ukrainian forces reached the southern approach to Kupyansk and the Oskil River on September 9.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian forces are likely clearing pockets of disorganized Russian forces caught in the rapid Ukrainian advance to Kupyansk,

Izyum, and the Oskil River, given the influx of observed pictures of Russian prisoners of war in the past 48 hours.[2]

**Ukrainian forces may collapse Russian positions around Izyum if they sever Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) north and south of Izyum.** Ukrainian forces continued to advance on Kupyansk and towards Izyum on September 9, and are undertaking measures to isolate the Russian Izyum grouping of forces. If Ukrainians are successful in severing the Russian GLOCs, then they will have an opportunity to create a cauldron around Izyum and collapse a major portion of the Russian positions in northeastern Ukraine.

**The Kremlin is rushing resources to the Kharkiv City-Izyum line in an attempt to halt Ukrainian advances after Ukrainian forces achieved remarkable operational surprise.** The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Kremlin wires published footage of Russian military convoys reportedly en route to reinforce Kupyansk, Izyum, and the general Kharkiv direction but did not acknowledge Ukrainian successes in the area.[3] While Russian milbloggers largely welcomed the reports of reinforcements, some criticized the Kremlin for first relocating units away from the Kharkiv City-Izyum line, only to deploy them again to the same location.[4] Russian forces have been redeploying out of southern Kharkiv Oblast to reinforce Donetsk Oblast and the Southern Axis to address the threat of a Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast and to resume offensive operations west of Donetsk City for several weeks.[5] The successful Ukrainian counteroffensive is upending the Kremlin's effort to make Izyum an economy of force area. Some milbloggers also noted that September 10 will be a decisive day if Russians are unable to generate reserves and capable command in time.[6]

**The Kremlin is refusing to publicly address Ukrainian successes in Kharkiv Oblast, but the counteroffensive likely prompted Russian President Vladimir Putin to convene a meeting with top Russian security and political officials on September 9.**[7] The Kremlin did not discuss the topic of the security council meeting, and the Kremlin's Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that the Kremlin will not comment on the "situation around Balakliya and other events in the special operation zone." [8] Peskov directed all inquiries regarding the issue to the Russian MoD.

**Ukraine's counteroffensive operation in Kherson Oblast to degrade Russian forces on the Southern Axis is continuing simultaneously with Ukrainian operations on the Kharkiv City-Izyum line.** Ukrainian forces continue to target Russian pontoon and ferry crossings daily, indicating a long-term commitment to consistently destroying re-emerging Russian GLOCs. Ukrainian forces are maintaining a strict operational silence in southern Ukraine, which may appear as if Ukrainian forces are not advancing. Ukrainian forces are also likely operating in several directions in Kherson Oblast.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Ukrainian forces have captured an estimated 2,500 square kilometers in Kharkiv Oblast in the Kharkiv counteroffensive as of September 9.**
- **The Kremlin is rushing resources to Kharkiv Oblast in response to effective Ukrainian operations.**
- **Ukrainian forces reached the outskirts of Kupyansk and are advancing on Izyum from the northwest, north, northeast, and southeast as of September 9 and will likely sever Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Izyum within the coming days.**
- **Ukrainian forces may have advanced north of Hrushivka towards a Russian logistics hub in Velykyi Burluk, northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian forces are continuing counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine, including interdicting Russian GLOCs, and degrading Russian morale.**
- **Russian forces conducted ground assaults north of Kharkiv City and across the Eastern Axis.**
- **The United Nations released a report detailing poor Russian treatment of Ukrainian POWs and detained civilians.**

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 8**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark  
September 8, 11:00 pm ET

[\*\*Click here to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.\*\*](#)

**Ukrainian successes on the Kharkiv City-Izyum line are creating fissures within the Russian information space and eroding confidence in Russian command to a degree not seen since a failed Russian river crossing in mid-May.** Ukrainian military officials announced that Ukrainian forces advanced 50km deep into Russian defensive positions north of Izyum on September 8, but the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) notably did not issue any statement regarding Ukrainian advances in Kharkiv Oblast.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian successes and the Russian MoD's silence prompted many Russian milbloggers to criticize and debate Russian failures to retain control over the city of Balakliya, approximately 44km northwest of Izyum. Some milbloggers claimed that Russian forces fully or partially withdrew from Balakliya in good order, while others complained that Ukrainian forces beat Russian forces out of the settlement.<sup>[2]</sup> Others noted that Rosgvardia units operating in the area did not coordinate their defenses or have sufficient artillery capabilities to prevent Ukrainian counterattacks in the region.<sup>[3]</sup> Milbloggers warned about an impending Ukrainian counteroffensive northwest of Izyum for days prior to Ukrainian advances, and some milbloggers noted that Russian command failed to prepare for "obvious and predictable" Ukrainian counteroffensives.<sup>[4]</sup> Others noted that Ukrainian forces have "completely outplayed" the Russian military command in Balakliya, while others encouraged readers to wait to discuss Russian losses and withhold criticism until Russian forces stabilize the frontlines.<sup>[5]</sup>

**The current tone and scale of Russian milblogger criticism echo the response to Russia's loss of a large amount of armor in a failed Russian river crossing in Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast, in May.**<sup>[6]</sup> ISW assessed at the time that the catastrophic Russian losses suffered due to incompetence shook the confidence of pro-Russian milbloggers, sparking criticism of the Russian war effort. Russian milbloggers and social media users accessed satellite imagery that showed devastating losses of Russian military equipment, which caused many to comment on the incompetence of the Russian military and analyze the scene on a tactical level. The Russian MoD did not comment on the situation, fueling burgeoning doubts about Russia's prospects in Ukraine.

**The Russian MoD repeated its Bilohorivka information mistake by failing to acknowledge the situation around Kharkiv Oblast and establish a desired narrative, leaving milbloggers to fill this gap with criticism of Russian forces.** The Russian MoD only claimed to have destroyed a Ukrainian ammunition depot in Balakliya.<sup>[7]</sup> Some milbloggers complained that the Russian MoD did not seize the information space in a timely manner to prevent the spread of Ukrainian social media on Russian Telegram channels, leading to distrust among Russian audiences.<sup>[8]</sup> Milbloggers largely supported the Russian MoD's narratives that the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast had completely failed just days prior to Ukrainian breakthroughs in Kharkiv Oblast.<sup>[9]</sup> Such a shift in milblogger perceptions of Russian progress in Ukraine can be partially attributed to the flaws in the Russian war-time information strategy, namely that:

1. The Russian MoD struggles to address unexpected Ukrainian operations because its information strategy relies on portraying the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an easy and faultless operation. This promotes a lack of situational awareness within the Kremlin and the Russian media space.
2. The Russian MoD needs a significant amount of time to develop and spread false narratives in the Russian information space. The Kremlin and Russian MoD successfully did so prior to the long-awaited Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south, and milbloggers largely followed the Kremlin's line. The Russian MoD failed to have a narrative ready for Ukrainian operations in Kharkiv Oblast.
3. Milbloggers will share and promote footage and imagery of fighting unfavorable to Russian forces that will dominate coverage in the Russian information space if the Russian MoD does not provide its own media.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Ukrainian successes on the Kharkiv City-Izyum line are creating fissures within the Russian information space and eroding confidence in Russian command to a degree not seen since a failed Russian river crossing in mid-May.**
- **Ukrainian forces in the Kharkiv Oblast counteroffensives advanced to within 20 kilometers of Russia's key logistical node in Kupyansk on September 8.**
- **Ukrainian forces will likely capture Kupyansk in the next 72 hours, severely degrading but not completely severing Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Izyum.**
- **Ukrainian forces are continuing to target Russian GLOCs, command-and-control points, and ammunition depots in Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian occupation authorities continue to intensify crackdowns and filtration measures to curb Ukrainian partisans and pro-Ukrainian saboteurs.**

- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks across the Eastern Axis.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 7

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Mason Clark

September 7, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian forces in southeastern Kharkiv Oblast are likely exploiting Russian force reallocation to the Southern Axis to conduct an opportunistic yet highly effective counteroffensive northwest of Izyum. Ukrainian forces likely used tactical surprise to advance at least 20km into Russian-held territory in eastern Kharkiv Oblast on September 7, recapturing approximately 400 square kilometers of ground. Russian sources claimed that Russian troops began deploying reinforcements to the area to defend against Ukrainian advances, and the Russian grouping in this area was likely understrength due to previous Russian deployments to support ongoing efforts to capture the remainder of Donetsk Oblast and support the southern axis.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukraine's ongoing operations in Kherson Oblast have forced Russian forces to shift their focus to the south, enabling Ukrainian forces to launch localized but highly effective counterattacks in the Izyum area.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian milbloggers voiced concern that this Ukrainian counterattack seeks to cut ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Russian rear areas in Kupyansk and Izyum, which would allow Ukrainian troops to isolate the Russian groupings in these areas and retake large swaths of territory.<sup>[3]</sup> These milbloggers used largely panicked and despondent tones, acknowledged significant Ukrainian gains, and claimed that the Ukrainian counteroffensive in the south may be a distraction from the ongoing actions in Kharkiv Oblast, which they name as the main Ukrainian effort.<sup>[4]</sup> The level of shock and frank discussion of Ukrainian successes by Russian milbloggers speaks to the scale of surprise achieved by Ukrainian forces, which is likely successfully demoralizing Russian forces. While it is unlikely that the southern counteroffensive and effort to attrit Russian forces in southern Ukraine is a feint for renewed operations in Kharkiv Oblast, Ukrainian forces likely took prudent advantage of a reallocation of Russian troops, equipment, and overall operational focus to launch localized counteroffensives toward critical points in Kharkiv Oblast.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to deny the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) September 6 report on the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).** Putin claimed that there is no Russian military equipment on the grounds of the ZNPP other than Rosgvardia elements.<sup>[5]</sup> Rosgvardia elements have carried out both occupation functions and frontline combat operations during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Putin's admission that there are Rosgvardia elements on the plant's grounds further confirms that Russian forces have militarized their presence at the ZNPP despite constant Russian denials. Putin also accused the IAEA of acting under Western pressure to not directly blame Ukraine of shelling the plant. As ISW previously assessed, the IAEA report was a coded yet damning condemnation of Russian activities at the ZNPP.<sup>[6]</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian forces are skillfully exploiting Russia's deployment of forces away from the Izyum-Kharkiv area to retake territory and threaten Russian GLOCs in the area, prompting demoralized responses from Russian milbloggers.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to deny the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) September 6 report on the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).
- Ukrainian forces continued strikes on Russian logistics nodes, manpower and equipment concentrations, transportation networks, and command and control points in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources reported kinetic activity in northern Kherson Oblast and in western Kherson Oblast along the Kherson-Mykolaiv border.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks north of Kharkiv City, northwest of Slovyansk, northeast of Siversk, south and northeast of Bakhmut, and northwest of Donetsk City.

- Ukrainian forces gained 400 square kilometers of territory northwest of Izyum on September 6-7 as part of an opportunistic and highly effective counteroffensive in southeastern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities announced November 4 as the potential date for annexation referenda in occupied areas of Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 6

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, George Barros, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 6, 10:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) September 6 report on the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) described numerous ways in which Russian occupation authorities and the Russian military are jeopardizing the safe operation of the plant.<sup>[1]</sup> The report does not attempt to determine which party is responsible for the shelling that has damaged the facility and repeatedly calls on "all relevant parties" to take measures to improve the situation. The moderation and apparent neutrality of that language can overshadow the extremely clear articulation of the Russian activities undermining the plant's safety and the fact that the report attributes no dangerous actions to Ukraine. **The IAEA's report is thus a coded condemnation of Russian moves that have created and are perpetuating the danger of nuclear disaster in Ukraine.**

The report specifically notes that Ukraine reported to the IAEA that Russian forces had positioned military equipment in two turbine halls and various other facilities in and around the ZNPP.<sup>[2]</sup> It adds that the inspection team that finally visited the plant recently directly observed Russian military equipment in turbine halls and elsewhere around the plant.<sup>[3]</sup> It added that personnel from Russia's state atomic energy organization, ROSATOM, were at the site and observed that "the presence of Rosatom senior technical staff could lead to interference with the normal lines of operational command or authority and create potential frictions when it comes to decision-making."<sup>[4]</sup> It also noted that "the operating staff did not have unrestricted access to some areas, such as the spray cooling ponds, roofs of the buildings, and structures in the area of the water intake, and that access to the cooling ponds area was required to be granted by the military personnel at the site."<sup>[5]</sup> The IAEA's inspection team was told that "the on-site emergency centre was not accessible to the plant staff for emergency response as it was occupied by the military authority." The team visited the alternative emergency center and observed that it lacked "an independent power supply or an independent ventilation system, and there is no internet connection to enable effective communication with all parties involved in an emergency response."<sup>[6]</sup>

The IAEA report thus demonstrates that Russian officials have placed military equipment in locations inhibiting access to essential facilities, installed their own personnel to oversee the plant's operations in ways that the IAEA judges could undermine effective response to a nuclear emergency, restricted the Ukrainian operating staff's access to key parts of the facility, and shifted the emergency center to a location lacking essential components vital to an effective response to a serious nuclear emergency. **The Russians have thus created conditions at the ZNPP that increase the risk that an emergency could occur and significantly increase the danger that the operating staff will be unable to respond efficiently and effectively in such an event.** Russian President Vladimir Putin could seek to use the fears that his actions are causing to coerce the IAEA and the international community into a de facto recognition of Russia's right to be involved in the operation of the ZNPP, which he might seek to portray as de facto recognition of Russia's occupation of southern Ukraine. The somewhat coded language of the IAEA report reflects the fact that Ukraine remains the operator of the ZNPP and the party responsible for its safe operation and for complying with the IAEA under international law. The IAEA cannot directly engage Russia regarding the plant's operation without at least tacitly admitting that Russia has some right to be consulted. Putin might seek to take advantage of this situation to attempt to create a process analogous to the Minsk Accords that established the "ceasefire" in Ukraine following Russia's 2014 invasion. The Minsk and Minsk II agreements treated Russia as a neutral party rather than a participant, thereby tacitly accepting Putin's assertion that Ukraine was in civil war rather than the victim of Russian aggression. Putin might seek to use the conditions he has created at the ZNPP to establish a parallel international framework undermining Ukraine's sovereign rights over the much greater expanse of Ukrainian territory Russian forces now occupy.

**Ukrainian forces conducted a counterattack in Kharkiv Oblast near Balakliya that likely drove Russian forces back to the left bank (north side) of the Severskyi Donets and Serednya Balakliika rivers on September 6.** Ukrainian forces likely captured Verbivka (less than 3 km northwest of Balakliya) on September 6.[7] Geolocated footage posted on September 6 shows Ukrainian infantry in eastern Verbivka (less than 3 km from Balakliya).[8] Multiple Russian sources acknowledged Ukrainian gains in Verbivka and reported that Russian forces demolished unspecified bridges in Balakliya's eastern environs to prevent further Ukrainian advances.[9] Images posted on September 6 also show a destroyed Russian bridge over the Serednya Balakliika River—a geographic feature behind which the Russian front line in this sector likely lies.[10] Social media users reported that Russian forces withdrew from checkpoints six kilometers west of Balakliya on September 6.[11]

Russian forces likely no longer maintain their previous positions in Bairak and Nova Husarivka (just south of Balakliya on the right bank of the Seversky Donets River). Russian forces likely abandoned Bayrak and Nova Husarivka in late August. Images posted on August 30 show that Russian forces blew the bridge over the Seversky Donets River near Bayrak on an unspecified date.[12] Bridge demolition activity indicates a planned Russian withdrawal. Ukraine's General Staff reported on September 6 that Russian forces conducted air strikes against Bayrak, indicating that Ukrainian forces may have advanced in the area.[13]

**Russia's deployment of forces from Kharkiv and eastern Ukraine to Ukraine's south is likely enabling Ukrainian counterattacks of opportunity.** The September 6 Ukrainian counterattack in Kharkiv was likely an opportunistic effort enabled by the redeployment of Russian forces away from the area to reinforce Russian positions against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast. Obituary data on Russian servicemen indicates that Russia deployed elements of the 147th Artillery Regiment of the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army to Kherson Oblast no earlier than late August.[14] This is the first time ISW has observed elements of Russia's elite 1st Guards Tank Army operating in southern Ukraine. Elements of the 147th previously fought in Bucha in Kyiv in March and elements of the 1st Guards Tank Army were active primarily along the Kharkiv Axis after the Russian withdrawal from Kyiv.[15]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The International Atomic Energy Agency report released on September 6 describes Russian activities that increase the likelihood of a nuclear accident at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant while decreasing the ability of the plant's personnel to respond to such an accident effectively.
- Ukrainian forces have launched likely opportunistic counterattacks in southern Kharkiv Oblast and retaken several settlements. Russian redeployments of forces from this area to defend against the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson likely prompted and facilitated these counterattacks.
- Ukrainian forces are continuing an operational-level interdiction campaign and striking Russian logistics nodes, transportation assets, manpower and equipment concentrations, and control points across Kherson Oblast.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources discussed kinetic activity northwest of Kherson City and in western Kherson Oblast along the Inhulets River.
- Russian forces made incremental gains south of Bakhmut and continued ground attacks north, northwest, and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian authorities continue setting conditions to Russify Ukrainians living in Russian-occupied Ukrainian territory.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 5**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Angela Howard, and Mason Clark

September 5, 10:30pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive is tangibly degrading Russian logistics and administrative capabilities in occupied southern Ukraine.** As ISW has previously reported, Ukrainian officials explicitly confirmed that Ukrainian troops seek to attrit Russian logistical capabilities in the south through precision strikes on manpower and equipment concentrations, command centers, and logistics nodes.[1] These counteroffensive actions also have intentional radiating effects on Russian occupation authorities. The head of the Kherson Oblast occupation regime, Kirill Stremousov, told Russian media outlet TASS that his administration has paused

annexation referendum plans in Kherson Oblast due to “security” concerns.[2] The Ukrainian Resistance Center similarly reported that Russian occupation authorities are abandoning plans for referenda due to the ongoing counteroffensive.[3] Shortly after *TASS* published his comment, Stremousov posted on Telegram denying he called for a pause because his administration had never set an official date for the referendum.[4] Both of Stremousov’s statements indicate a high level of disorganization within occupation regimes that is likely being exacerbated by the effects of the counteroffensive. Ukrainian forces intend to slowly chip away at both Russian tactical and operational level capabilities in Kherson Oblast, and in doing so will likely have significant impacts on the administrative and bureaucratic capabilities of occupation officials.

**Putin publicly praised DNR and LNR forces (and denigrated the Russian military) on September 5, likely to motivate proxy recruitment and reframe Russian coverage of the war.** Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on September 5 that personnel in the 1st and 2nd Army Corps (the armed forces of the DNR and LNR) are fighting better in Donbas than professional Russian soldiers and insinuated that he is unhappy with the performance of the Russian Ministry of Defense.[5] Putin’s comments are likely intended to promote recruitment and force generation in the DNR and LNR and refocus coverage of the war in the Russian media space away from the fighting in southern Ukraine. Russian forces have increasingly relied on DNR and LNR personnel as core fighting forces, and the Kremlin likely seeks to rhetorically elevate their role in the war to enhance recruitment and increase morale. Putin additionally likely seeks to elevate the Kremlin’s preferred (and false) narrative of its invasion of Ukraine as an effort to “protect” the DNR and LNR by praising their forces.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- The Ukrainian counteroffensive is tangibly degrading Russian logistics and administrative capabilities in occupied southern Ukraine.
- Putin publicly praised DNR and LNR forces (and denigrated the Russian military) on September 5, likely to motivate proxy recruitment and reframe Russian coverage of the war.
- Ukrainian military officials maintained their operational silence regarding the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive but reported on the further destruction of Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Central Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks east of Siversk, northeast and south of Bakhmut, and along the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian special forces conducted a limited operation against a Russian FSB base in the Enerhodar area.
- Power unit No. 6 of the ZNPP became disconnected from the Ukrainian power grid.
- Russian authorities continue to seek unconventional sources of combat power and are increasingly turning to ill and infirm individuals.
- Occupation authorities set a 1.25 ruble/1 hryvnia exchange rate in Zaporizhia Oblast in order to facilitate the economic integration of occupied Zaporizhia into the Russian Federation.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 4

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, Frederick W. Kagan

September 4, 10:00 pm ET

**Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.**

The Ukrainian counteroffensive is making verifiable progress in the south and the east. Ukrainian forces are advancing along several axes in western Kherson Oblast and have secured territory across the Siverskyi Donets River in Donetsk Oblast. The pace of the counteroffensive will likely change dramatically from day to day as Ukrainian forces work to starve the Russians of necessary supplies, disrupt their command and control, and weaken their morale even as counteroffensive ground assaults continue. The Russians will occasionally counterattack and regain some lost ground and will of course conduct likely fierce artillery and air attacks against liberated settlements and advancing Ukrainian troops. Ukrainian forces have made substantial enough progress to begin evoking more realistic commentary from the Russian milbloggers, who had been hewing very closely to the Kremlin's optimistic rhetoric until today.

**Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that Ukrainian forces liberated two unnamed settlements in southern Ukraine and one settlement in Donetsk Oblast on September**

**4.[1]** Zelensky added that the Ukrainian 54th Mechanized Brigade also advanced in the direction Lysychansk-Siversk and established positions on unspecified heights. Ukrainian officials shared geolocated footage that shows Ukrainian forces raising a Ukrainian flag on a hospital building in Vysokopillya, south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast administrative border.**[2]** Social media sources confirmed that Ukrainian forces crossed the Siverskyi Donets River and liberated Ozerne, 20 km northwest of Siversk.**[3]**

**Geolocated footage from September 2-3 shows Russian forces firing MLRS rounds from positions on the grounds of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) within 1km of a nuclear reactor.****[4]** Russian opposition outlet *The Insider's* footage of Russian forces operating MLRS systems at the ZNPP reaffirms ISW's prior assessment that Russian forces have militarized the ZNPP.**[5]** The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced on September 3 that the ZNPP has been disconnected from the power grid for the second time in its operational history (the first instance occurred on August 25), likely due to continued Russian false flag attacks and other military activities in and around the ZNPP.**[6]** Russian sources claimed the ZNPP has stopped providing energy to Ukraine.**[7]**

**Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Russia is ready to negotiate Moscow's conditions for ending the Russian war in Ukraine on September 4, but the Kremlin is maintaining its maximalist goals to "denazify" Ukraine.** Peskov said that the Kremlin would discuss with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky how Ukraine would meet Russian conditions during peace negotiations and noted that Russia will complete all stated objectives of the "special military operation."**[8]** Peskov also noted that all conflicts end at the negotiations table and expressed that relations between Russia and the West will improve soon. Peskov's statement comes amidst the reports of the Ukrainian counteroffensive progress in southern Ukraine. The stated objectives of the "special military operation" include regime change in Kyiv as well as the surrender of all of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts to the Kremlin. Russian efforts to integrate occupied areas of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv Oblasts demonstrate that Moscow expects to keep those territories permanently as well. Peskov's statement is thus a reiteration of Moscow's demands for Ukrainian surrender and offers no indication that Moscow is willing to negotiate seriously and on the basis of a realistic assessment of its prospects in a war that is turning in Ukraine's direction.

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that Ukrainian forces liberated two unnamed settlements in southern Ukraine and one settlement in Donetsk Oblast. ISW has independently confirmed the liberation of the settlement in Donetsk Oblast and one of the settlements in Kherson Oblast.**
- **Geolocated footage shows Russian forces firing MLRS rounds from positions on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.**

- Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs), ammunition depots, and key positions to exhaust Russian forces and restrain Russian combat power.
- The Ukrainian liberation of Vysokopillya ignited critical discussions among some Russian milbloggers while the Russian Defense Ministry maintained that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct “unsuccessful attempts” to advance.
- Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) 127th Regiment of the 1st Army Corps personnel reportedly refused to fight due to a lack of supplies.
- Ukrainian forces regained territory on the left bank of the Siverskyi Donets River in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast of Bakhmut and west of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces are reportedly moving military assets to areas situated along major ground lines of communication (GLOCS) in rear areas in Zaporizhia Oblast.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 3

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Mason Clark September 3, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian officials directly stated on September 3 that the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive in southern Ukraine is an intentionally methodical operation to degrade Russian forces and logistics, rather than one aimed at immediately recapturing large swathes of territory. Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Oleksiy Arestovych told the *Wall Street Journal* on September 3 that the current goal of Ukrainian forces in the south is the “systemic grinding of Putin’s army and that Ukrainian troops are slowly and systematically uncovering and destroying Russia’s operational logistical supply system with artillery and precision weapon strikes.[1] Arestovych’s statement echoes ISW’s assessment that the ongoing counteroffensive will likely not result in immediate gains and that Ukrainian forces seek to disrupt key logistics nodes that support Russian operations in the south and chip away at Russian military capabilities.[2]

**The Kremlin could intensify its efforts to promote self-censorship among Russian milbloggers and war correspondents who cover the war in Ukraine.** Russian authorities arrested and later released prominent Russian milblogger Semyon Pegov (employed by Telegram channel WarGonzo) in Moscow on September 2, due to what WarGonzo described as Pegov drunkenly threatening a hotel administrator.[3] Pegov is an experienced military journalist and WarGonzo has extensive links to the Russian military and access to Russian military operations in Donbas in 2014, Syria in 2015, and Ukraine in 2022.[4] ISW continues to track anomalous activity regarding Russia’s milbloggers. We cannot confirm the circumstances of Pegov’s arrest, but WarGonzo’s explanation may be correct.

However, ISW previously assessed in July that the Kremlin seeks to promote self-censorship among milbloggers who have undermined Kremlin efforts to portray the war in Ukraine as a decisive Russian victory, and the Kremlin may seek to amplify this censorship. Russian military bloggers have candidly reported on Russian forces’ poor performance in Ukraine and have discussed how the Kremlin has attempted to censor their coverage in Ukraine.[5] Prominent milblogger Rybar noted that the relationship between the Russian military command and war correspondents particularly soured after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with war correspondents during the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on June 17, during which Putin likely tried to defuse milbloggers’ discontent.[6] The Kremlin later likely intensified efforts to promote self-censorship among milbloggers by using a leaked letter from mothers of Russian soldiers who demanded the ban of journalist activity on the frontlines in July.[7]

The Kremlin so far has not escalated to detaining milbloggers for their coverage. Pegov's arrest—if connected to his coverage in Ukraine—would be a significant development in Russian efforts to control the Russian information space. ISW forecasted that the Russian information space would change significantly if the Ministry of Defense cracked down on milbloggers and stopped them from operational reporting since ISW uses milbloggers and Russian war correspondents as sources of Russian claims on a daily basis.<sup>[8]</sup> We will continue to observe and report on milblogger and war correspondent behavior and will flag significant changes in the Russian information space as we observe them.

### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian officials directly stated that the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive is a methodical operation to intentionally degrade Russian forces and logistics in the south, rather than one aimed at immediately recapturing large swathes of territory.
- The Kremlin may be intensifying efforts to foster self-censorship among Russian milbloggers and war correspondents who are covering the war in Ukraine.
- Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces continued positional battles along the Kherson-Mykolaiv frontline and that Ukrainian troops are focusing on striking Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs), equipment and manpower concentrations, and logistics nodes along the Southern Axis.
- Social media footage shows evidence of effective Ukrainian strikes in western and central Kherson Oblast.
- Russian milbloggers continue to claim that Ukrainian forces are fighting in western Kherson Oblast, along the Inhulets River, and in northern Kherson south of the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast and south of Bakhmut and north and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces may be conducting localized attacks along the line of contact in Western Zaporizhia Oblast to disrupt ongoing Russian troop deployments.
- Russian authorities continue to generate combat power from recruitment through state-owned enterprises and prisons to circumvent general mobilization.
- Russian occupation authorities are increasingly struggling to provide basic services in occupied areas of Ukraine.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 2

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Mason Clark

September 2, 9:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian independent polling organization Levada posted survey results on September 1 indicating that while the majority of Russians still support military operations in Ukraine, public support for the war may be gradually declining. Levada stated that the overall support for Russian forces in Ukraine has not changed significantly over the summer, with 76% of the survey's respondents in favor of the action of Russian forces in Ukraine (46% strongly supporting and 30% generally supporting).<sup>[1]</sup> Levada also noted that 48% of respondents believe that it is necessary for Russian operations in Ukraine to continue.<sup>[2]</sup> The polls showed that 44% of respondents were in favor of peace

negotiations and that a majority of Russia's younger segments of the population (18-39-year-olds) favor negotiations.<sup>[3]</sup> In March of 2022, Levada found that 53% of respondents strongly support Russian military actions in Ukraine but that the percentage of respondents in this category declined to 46% by August.<sup>[4]</sup> This is a minor deterioration and will not fundamentally impair the Kremlin's ability to conduct the war. However, declining support and war weariness will likely increasingly impede Russian recruitment and force generation efforts.

**Russian and proxy officials are solidifying their narratives surrounding the Ukrainian counteroffensive to amplify false claims that the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast is detrimental to Ukraine's continued existence.** Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu claimed on September 2 that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky planned the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast solely to create an illusion among "Western curators" that Ukrainian forces can conduct an effective counteroffensive.<sup>[5]</sup> Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Deputy Interior Minister Vitaly Kiselyov claimed that Ukrainian forces' engagement in the counteroffensive was (referring to the offensive in past tense) "collective suicide" and suffered high casualties.<sup>[6]</sup> Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko claimed on September 1 that internal Ukrainian divisions will soon force the military conflict to end.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian milbloggers increased their amplification of these narratives on September 1–2 as the information space around the success and tempo of the Ukrainian counteroffensive remained murky.<sup>[8]</sup> Russian sources will likely continue propagating these false information narratives to exploit Ukrainian operational silence. As ISW has previously noted, complex counteroffensives cannot be resolved overnight or in a matter of days, and the Russian presentation of an immediate Ukrainian failure due to a lack of constant Ukrainian claims of territorial gains is a deliberate obfuscation of reality.<sup>[9]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Independent polling showed that a majority of Russians still support the Russian war in Ukraine.
- Russian and proxy officials are solidifying their narratives surrounding the Ukrainian counteroffensive to claim it will debilitate the Ukrainian military.
- Ukrainian officials reported that positional battles are underway in unspecified areas of Kherson Oblast and that Ukrainian forces are continuing to strike Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs), logistics nodes, and reinforcement efforts throughout southern and central Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks south and northeast of Bakhmut and along the western and northern outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued targeting Ukrainian rear areas along GLOCs and may be reinforcing the Southern Axis by reallocating equipment from Russian rear areas in Donbas and Crimea.
- Ukrainian sources claim that Russia can pull an additional 300,000–350,000 military personnel from support units in Russia, Syria, Armenia, Tajikistan, Nagorno Karabakh, and Kazakhstan. These figures do not accurately represent the fact that support units placed into combat roles will not generate substantial combat power and are necessary for supporting combat, training, and other operations.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 1

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Mason Clark

September 1, 11pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated his false framing of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine as a defensive operation to protect Russia on September 1.** During a meeting with schoolchildren in Kaliningrad, Putin stated that the purpose of the "special military operation" is to eliminate the "anti-Russian enclave" that is forming in Ukraine and is an existential threat to the Russian state.<sup>[1]</sup> Putin similarly invoked the concept of an "anti-Russia" in his February 24 speech declaring a "special operation" in Ukraine.<sup>[2]</sup> Putin's reiteration of an "anti-Russian" entity that must be defeated militarily to defend Russia reaffirms his maximalist intentions for Ukraine and is likely intended to set the information conditions to call for further Russian efforts and force generation going into the fall and winter of this year.

**Russian milbloggers continued attempts to claim that Ukraine's counteroffensive in the south has already failed.** Igor Girkin, a Russian nationalist and former commander of militants in the 2014 fighting in Donbas, stated that Ukrainian forces are continuing to attack after the "failure of the first attack"—falsely portraying ongoing Ukrainian operations as separate attacks after an initial failure—and reiterated the common Russian narrative that what he claims are Ukraine's "Western handlers" pushed Ukraine to conduct a counteroffensive.<sup>[3]</sup> Girkin additionally stated that Ukraine's Western partners poorly planned for the counteroffensive, underestimated Russian capabilities and assumed Russians are incompetent, and principally accounted for political—not military—considerations.<sup>[4]</sup> One milblogger stated that Ukraine's defeat in the south will be the strongest psychological blow to Kyiv and that this failure will have a continued long-term psychological effect on Ukraine's morale.<sup>[5]</sup> The Russian milbloggers are increasingly centrally describing Ukrainian attacks as tactless and "suicidal" rushes.<sup>[6]</sup>

**As ISW has reported, military operations on the scale of the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive do not succeed or fail in a day or a week.**<sup>[7]</sup> Ukrainians and the West should not fall for Russian information operations portraying the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast as having failed almost instantly or that depict Ukraine as a helpless puppet of Western masters for launching it at this time.

**The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin has extended the deadline for Russian forces to capture Donetsk Oblast from August 31 to the still highly unlikely target date of September 15, and Russian forces are conducting several redeployments to meet this goal.**<sup>[8]</sup> Deputy Chief of the Ukrainian Main Operational Department Oleksiy Gromov stated that Russian forces are regrouping elements of the Central Military District (CMD) operating in the Luhansk-Donetsk Oblast directions in an effort to increase the number of troops west of Donetsk City.<sup>[9]</sup> Gromov added that Russian forces deployed two battalion tactical groups (BTGs) in the direction of the western Zaporizhia Oblast frontline from Belgorod Oblast, which he noted might support resumed Russian offensive operations in Donbas.<sup>[10]</sup> Gromov stated that Russian military officials are continuing to form the 3rd Army Corps to deploy to Donetsk Oblast, also likely to resume offensive operations in the Donetsk operational area.<sup>[11]</sup> Gromov noted that it is unclear if all mobilized 3rd Army Corps servicemen have undergone military training.<sup>[12]</sup> Russian forces also reportedly introduced one BTG each to the Slovyansk and Mykolaiv directions.<sup>[13]</sup> RFE/RL's footage also shows that Russian forces are continuing to react to the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast by consistently transferring military convoys to southern Ukrainian via the Kerch Strait Bridge.<sup>[14]</sup> These Russian deployments are likely intended to set conditions for a revised operation to capture Donetsk Oblast, but Russian forces remain highly unlikely to make the progress necessary to capture the Oblast by September 15.

**The Kremlin is likely seeking to capitalize on the significance of seizing areas around Donetsk City that have been contested since 2014 to boost the morale of Russian and proxy**

**forces.** Russian forces have not been successful in advancing toward Siversk or capturing the E40 highway to Slovyansk-Bakhmut since the fall of Lysychansk and are likely experiencing challenges incentivizing Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) elements to continue fighting to reach the Donetsk Oblast administrative borders.[15] Russian forces had minor territorial gains around Avdiivka, which generated positive chatter among the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) fighters in early August after which the advances stalled west of Donetsk City.[16]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian logistical nodes and key positions throughout Kherson Oblast in support of the ongoing counteroffensive in southern Ukraine.
- Russian milbloggers reiterated claims that Ukrainian forces are fighting along four axes of advance in Western Kherson Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks northwest of Slovyansk, south and northeast of Bakhmut, and northwest and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian authorities escalated claims that Ukrainian forces are threatening both the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and the newly arrived International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) delegation on the territory of the ZNPP.
- The Russian 3rd Army Corps is continuing to form for deployment to Donbas.
- Russian occupation authorities are likely increasingly recognizing their inability to successfully hold sham referenda in occupied areas of Ukraine due to Russian military failures and ongoing Ukrainian resistance in occupied territories.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 31**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 31, 10:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainians and the West should not fall for Russian information operations portraying the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast as having failed almost instantly or that depict Ukraine as a helpless puppet of Western masters for launching it at this time. The Russian Ministry of Defense began conducting an information operation to present Ukraine's counteroffensive as decisively failed almost as soon as it was announced on August 29.[1] Several prominent military bloggers—even bloggers who have historically been critical of the Kremlin—are promoting this message.[2] Other milbloggers are additionally promoting the narrative that Ukraine's Western handlers pushed Ukraine to launch the counteroffensive prematurely and/or too late for “political” reasons and because the West expected a counteroffensive.[3] Kremlin media outlets have also centrally amplified allegations of civil-military conflict between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi to bolster the narrative that Zelensky sought to conduct a counteroffensive for inappropriate political reasons whereas Zaluzhnyi assessed Ukrainian forces were not militarily prepared to do so.[4]

**Military operations on the scale of this counteroffensive do not succeed or fail in a day or a week.** Ukrainian officials have long acknowledged that they do not have the sheer mass of mechanized forces that would have been needed to conduct a blitzkrieg-like drive to destroy the Russian defenses in Kherson Oblast or anywhere. They have instead been setting conditions for months by attacking and disrupting Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs), Russian command and control, and Russian logistics systems throughout southwestern occupied Ukraine. The timing of the start of the counteroffensive is consistent with the observed degradation of Russian capabilities in western Kherson Oblast balanced against the need to start liberating occupied Ukrainian lands and people as soon as possible. There is no reason to suspect that the timing has been materially influenced by inappropriate considerations or tensions. Counteroffensive operations now underway will very likely unfold over the

coming weeks and possibly months as Ukrainian forces take advantage of the conditions they have set to defeat particular sectors of the line they have identified as vulnerable while working to retake their cities and towns without destroying them in the process.

**Military forces that must conduct offensive operations without the numerical advantages normally required for success in such operations often rely on misdirections and feints to draw the defender away from the sectors of the line on which breakthrough and exploitation efforts will focus.**

The art of such feints is two-fold. First, they must be conducted with sufficient force to be believable. Since they are feints, however, rather than deliberate attacks expected to succeed, they often look like failures—the attacking units will fall back when they feel they have persuaded the defender of their seriousness. Second, they take time to have an effect. When the purpose of the feint is to draw the defender's forces away from the intended breakthrough sectors, the attacker must wait until the defender has actually moved forces. There will thus likely be a delay between the initial feint operations and the start of decisive operations. The situation during that delay may well look like the attack has failed.

**The Ukrainian military and government are repeating requests to avoid any reporting or forecasting of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, a measure that is essential if the counteroffensive includes feints or misdirections.[5]** It is of course possible that the counteroffensive will fail, that any particular breakthrough attempt that fails was not a feint, or that the Ukrainian military has made some error in planning, timing, or execution that will undermine the success of its operations. But the situation in which Ukraine finds itself calls for a shrewd and nuanced counteroffensive operation with considerable misdirection and careful and controlled advances. It is far more likely in these very early days, therefore, that a successful counteroffensive would appear to be stalling or unsuccessful for some time before its success became manifest.

**ISW and other analysts studying this war have been appropriately cautious and circumspect in announcing the culmination or defeat of major Russian offensive operations. ISW will apply the same caution and circumspection to assessing the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive and exhorts others to do the same.**

Russian authorities released a list of the locations of schools in occupied areas, including precise coordinates, ostensibly warning of possible Ukrainian attacks against them as the school year begins on September 1. This announcement could be preparation for Russian false-flag attacks on schools, for an explanation of very low attendance, or for some other purpose. The Russian Defense Ministry (MoD) issued a statement on August 31 warning that Ukrainian forces are preparing to shell schools in occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts.[6] The Russian MoD released a list of the addresses and exact locations of all schools in occupied areas of Ukraine under the pretext of "ensuring the safety of students and teachers." [7] This statement, along with the list of schools in occupied areas, could be an attempt to set information conditions for three potential courses of action on September 1. The first, and most dangerous, may be a preparation for Russian troops to stage a false-flag attack against educational infrastructure in occupied areas of Ukraine and blame the Ukrainian armed forces for the attack. The second scenario, which is more likely, is that Russian authorities may be setting conditions to explain very low enrollment and attendance in Russian-run schools as the school year begins. As ISW reported on August 30, Ukrainian families with children have been increasingly leaving Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine as the school year approaches.[8] Russian authorities may seek to amplify the claimed threat of Ukrainian strikes against schools in order to explain low attendance levels. The third scenario is that Russian authorities could be attempting to establish a published no-strike list by identifying specific civilian infrastructure, which will later allow them to use the identified schools as military bases with the expectation that Ukrainian forces will not target designated civilian infrastructure.

**Russian authorities are additionally using the start of the new school year to escalate efforts to institutionalize the elimination of Ukrainian identity.** Russian authorities continued to disseminate Russian educational materials in schools in occupied areas of Ukraine. Russian-backed authorities from Sevastopol arrived in Starobilsk, Luhansk Oblast, to deliver backpacks and official state symbols of the Russian Federation to local schools.[9] The Russian-appointed head of Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov, similarly called on educators in Crimea to intensify patriotic programming in Crimean schools, notably to teach children about Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to conduct a "special military operation" in Ukraine.[10] Ukrainian outlet *Strana* reported that the first lesson that will be taught in schools in occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts is oriented on a lesson outline that pulls from Putin's article on "The Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", his speeches on the recognition of the Donetsk and

Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR), and the commencement of the "special military operation."<sup>[11]</sup> In these speeches, Putin rejected the legitimacy of Ukrainian identity, declaring that it "is entirely the product of the Soviet era... shaped on the lands of historical Russia."<sup>[12]</sup> He also repeatedly declared that Ukraine is part of Russia and cannot be a state in its own right. The explicit link between Russian-imposed curricula in Ukrainian schools and these speeches and writings is part of an effort to erase the Ukrainian identity in Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine through educational control.<sup>[13]</sup>

**The G7 Non-Proliferation Directors Group stated that Russian attempts to disconnect the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) would be "unacceptable," ahead of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) delegation's visit to the plant.**<sup>[14]</sup> The G7 Non-Proliferation Directors Group noted that the ZNPP should not be used for military activities or the storage of military material. Satellite imagery provided by Maxar previously showed Russian combat vehicles sheltering under the ZNPP infrastructure very close to a reactor vessel.<sup>[15]</sup>

**Russian and Ukrainian sources again exchanged accusations of shelling and loitering munition strikes on Enerhodar on August 31.** Kremlin-sponsored sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) strike on the Enerhodar City Council building, and Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces shelled the building in an effort to frame Ukrainian forces ahead of the IAEA visit.<sup>[16]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **The Russian Ministry of Defense and Russian milbloggers began an information operation declaring the Ukrainian counteroffensive a failure almost as soon as it was launched. It is far too soon to assess the progress of the counteroffensive operation, however, which will likely be difficult to evaluate in the short term if it relies on feints and misdirection.**
- **Russian occupation authorities are imposing a curriculum on Ukrainian students aimed at eliminating the notion of Ukrainian national identity, explicitly in line with Russian President Vladimir Putin's speeches and writings falsely claiming that Ukraine is part of Russia, and that the Ukrainian identity was an invention of the Soviet period.**
- **The G7 Non-Proliferation Directors Group condemned Russian attempts to disconnect the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant from the Ukrainian power grid as "unacceptable" ahead of the arrival of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) delegation to the plant.**
- **Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack north of Kharkiv City.**
- **Russian forces conducted ground attacks south of Bakhmut and along the western outskirts of Donetsk City.**
- **Russian-appointed officials in Crimea began "reconstructing" air defense systems to counter smaller targets in response to recurring drone attacks on the peninsula. Russian officials are likely strengthening Crimean air defenses at the expense of other theaters.**
- **Zabaykalsky Krai announced the formation of the "Daursky" volunteer engineer-sapper battalion.**
- **Ukrainian partisans conducted an improvised explosive device (IED) attack against the headquarters of the "Together with Russia" political organization in Berdyansk, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, where occupation authorities were reportedly preparing for sham referenda.**

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 29**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

**Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, George Barros, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan**

**August 30, 10:30 pm ET**

**[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.**

**Ukrainian forces began striking Russian pontoon ferries across the Dnipro River on August 29, which is consistent with the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. The effects of destroying ferries will likely be more ephemeral than those of putting bridges out of commission, so attacking them makes sense in conjunction with active ground operations. Ukrainian military**

officials confirmed that Ukrainian forces destroyed a Russian pontoon-ferry crossing in Lvove, approximately 16km west of Nova Kakhovka on the right bank of the Dnipro River on August 29.[1] Ukrainian and Russian sources have also reported that Ukrainian forces struck a pontoon crossing constructed out of barges near the Antonivsky Road Bridge.[2]

**Ukrainian forces have long undertaken efforts to destroy Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) prior to the announcement of the counteroffensive operation, which likely indicates that Ukrainian forces are committed to a long-term effort - composed of both strikes and ground assaults.** Ukrainian strikes on Russian GLOCs disrupt the Russians' ability to supply and reinforce their positions with manpower and equipment, which will assist Ukrainian ground counteroffensives. Satellite imagery shows that Russian forces are continuing to use ferries to transfer a limited amount of military equipment daily via the Dnipro River.[3]

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive is thus a cohesive process that will require some time to correctly execute.** The Kremlin will likely exploit the lack of immediate victory over Kherson City or Ukrainian operational silence on the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive to misrepresent Ukrainian efforts as failing and to undermine public confidence in its prospects.

**Russian forces are continuing to react and adjust their positions throughout southern Ukraine, likely both as a response to the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive and in preparation for broader Ukrainian counter-offensives further east.** Russian forces are continuing to transfer large convoys of military equipment from Crimea and Melitopol.[4] Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov also noted that Russian forces have opened up around five military bases and barracks in Melitopol and will likely continue to prepare defenses around Melitopol given its strategically vital GLOCs between Rostov Oblast and southern Ukraine.[5] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces in Kherson Oblast are attempting to conduct rotations of troops, likely in an effort to reinforce some vulnerable positions.[6]

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive is likely driving Russian redeployment and reprioritization throughout the theater.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are reinforcing the grouping of forces operating west of Donetsk City area with elements of the Central Military District (CMD).[7] ISW has previously identified that CMD units, under the command of the CMD Commander Colonel General Aleksandr Lapin, operated in the Lysychansk-Siversk area and recently concluded an operational pause in mid-August.[8] The movement of CMD units to Donetsk City area further suggests that Russian forces are deprioritizing the Siversk advance in favor of attempting to sustain momentum around the Donetsk City area. ISW has previously reported that Russian advances around Avdiivka and the western Donetsk City area have effectively culminated following Russian limited breakthroughs around the Butivka Coal Mine ventilation shaft.[9] The redeployment suggests that the Russian command has recognized that it cannot pursue more than one offensive operation at a time.

The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces are deploying elements of the newly-formed 3rd Army Corps, which is at least in part composed of inexperienced volunteers, to reinforce neglected Russian positions in Kharkiv and Zaporizhia Oblasts.[10] The deployment of the 3rd Army Corps may indicate that Russian forces seek to recoup combat power for use in offensive operations around Donetsk City or defensive operations in Kherson by replacing experienced troops with raw and poorly trained volunteer units.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely setting conditions for the coerced cultural assimilation of displaced Ukrainians in Russia to erase their Ukrainian cultural identity.** Head of the Russian Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs, Igor Barinov, spoke about the creation of "adaptation centers" for "migrants" living in Russia with Putin on August 29. [11] Barinov stated that with Putin's permission and support, the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs is working on programs in unspecified pilot regions to ensure that "migrants" to Russia know and respect Russian traditions, customs, and laws to prevent "migrants" from experiencing "social isolation" in Russia.[12] Barinov claimed that there is a risk of ethnic minorities in Russia forming enclaves that will exacerbate ethnic crime within Russia, and that "adaptation centers" would be an effective tool in maintaining the stability of migrant communities.[13] Russian outlet Vot Tak amplified statements made by Russian migration expert Alexander Verkhovsky that such programs should structure themselves as something between refugee camps and vocational training centers for migrants.[14] Verkhovsky also noted that over 3.5 million displaced Ukrainians have entered Russia since the full-scale invasion began on February 24.[15] Many displaced Ukrainians in Russia are not in Russia voluntarily, and the Russian government has forcefully transferred at least 1,000 children from Mariupol to Russia.[16] The forcible transfer of children of one group to another "with intent to

destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" is a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[17]

The creation of so-called social adaptation programs in Russia would add a social dimension to the legal frameworks through which Putin likely seeks to forcibly culturally assimilate Ukrainians into the Russian Federation. As ISW previously reported on August 29, Putin signed two decrees on August 27 in a purported effort to assist stateless peoples and migrants from Ukraine to indefinitely live and work in the Russian Federation with certain social payments allocated to those who left Ukraine following February 18.[18] Russian Security Council Chairman Dmitry Medvedev also stated that Russia will begin working on a bill in September for the condition of entry, exit, and stay in Russia for foreigners.[19] Putin's decrees and the bill alluded to by Medvedev are likely meant to set conditions for migrants from Ukraine to remain in Russia permanently, thus essentially forming the backbone of an extended campaign to at population transfer between Ukraine and Russia with the purpose of Russifying Ukraine. Programs at so-called adaptation centers would likely serve as a form of cultural reprogramming to erase Ukrainian cultural identity from displaced Ukrainian who either fled to Russia or were deported by Russian authorities.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations with ground assaults and strikes against Russian GLOCs across the Dnipro River. Ukrainian forces made gains on the ground and have begun striking pontoon ferries across the river.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely setting legal and social conditions for the coerced cultural assimilation of displaced Ukrainians in Russia to erase their Ukrainian cultural identity.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest of Izyum, south of Bakhmut, and near the western outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack in northern Kherson Oblast.
- An anonymous senior US military official stated that the US believes that Russia is firing artillery from positions around and in the vicinity of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian occupation authorities are continuing efforts to forcibly-integrate schools in occupied Ukraine into the Russian educational system and extending methods of social control.
- Russian forces are continuing to move military equipment into Crimea.
- Russian federal subjects (regions) are continuing to recruit and deploy volunteer battalions.
- Russian occupation authorities are taking measures to forcibly-integrate Ukrainian schools into the Russian education space in preparation for the approaching school year.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 29**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan  
August 29, 10:15 pm ET

**Click here** to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian military officials announced the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kherson Oblast on August 29.** Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces have broken through the first line of defenses in unspecified areas of Kherson Oblast and are seeking to take advantage of the disruption of Russian ground lines of communication caused by Ukrainian HIMARS strikes over many weeks.[1] Ukrainian officials did not confirm liberating any settlements, but some Russian milbloggers and unnamed sources speaking with Western outlets stated that Ukrainian forces liberated several settlements west and northwest of Kherson City, near the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River, and south of the Kherson-Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border.[2] The Russian Defense Ministry (MoD), Russian proxies, and some Russian milbloggers denounced the Ukrainian announcement of the counteroffensive as "propaganda." [3]

**Many Russian milbloggers nevertheless reported a wide variety of Ukrainian attacks along the entire line of contact, and the information space will likely become confused for a time due to panic among Russian sources.**[4] Russian outlets have also vaguely mentioned evacuations of civilians from Kherson Oblast, but then noted that occupation authorities in Kherson Oblast are calling on residents to seek shelter rather than flee.[5] ISW will report on the Ukrainian counteroffensive in a new section below.

**International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi announced that the IAEA mission to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) left for the plant on August 29.** Grossi specified that he is leading the mission but neither he nor the IAEA specified a timeline for the investigation.[6]

**Russian sources continue to make claims likely intended to manipulate public opinion and the IAEA investigation.** Several Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces shelled Enerhodar and shared photos allegedly showing the location where Ukrainian forces struck a nuclear fuel storage site on the territory of the ZNPP on August 29.[7] Ukrainian sources reported continued Russian shelling of Enerhodar near the ZNPP.[8] Russian sources claimed on August 29 that Ukrainian forces fired on the Khmelnitsky Nuclear Power Plant deep in western Ukraine and far from the front lines; Ukrainian authorities denied these claims.[9] Russian authorities also alleged that several IAEA members from the current mission will remain at ZNPP permanently, but ISW cannot confirm these reports at this time.[10] **Satellite imagery from August 29 provided by Maxar Technologies shows Russian combat vehicles apparently sheltering under ZNPP infrastructure very close to a reactor vessel.**

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian military officials announced that Ukrainian forces began a counteroffensive operation in Kherson Oblast on August 29.
- International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi announced that the IAEA mission to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant left for the plant.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground assaults north of Slovyansk, southeast of Siversk, south of Bakhmut, and in western Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian forces continued efforts to advance around Donetsk City.
- Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground assault in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Russian federal subjects continued efforts to form new battalions, attract new recruits, and coerce conscripts into signing military contracts.
- Ukrainian partisan activity continues to threaten Russian occupation authorities' control in occupied territories.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 28**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 28, 8:30 ET

**[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.**

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed two decrees on August 27 in a reported effort to assist stateless peoples and residents of Donbas and Ukraine live and work in the Russian Federation. The first decree allows Donbas residents, Ukrainians, and stateless peoples to live and work in Russia indefinitely.[1] The decree also allows Ukrainian and Donbas residents to work in Russia without a permit so long as they have acquired an identification card within 30 days of the August 27 decree.[2] The order also requires that all Donbas and Ukrainian residents arriving to Russia undergo mandatory fingerprint registration and a medical examination for the use of drugs, psychotropic substances, infectious diseases, and HIV.[3]

The second decree orders Russian social services to provide social payments to individuals forced to leave Ukraine and the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic (DNR and LNR) for Russia after February 18, 2022.[4] The decree mandates that social services provide monthly pension payments of 10,000 rubles (approximately \$167) to all affected peoples, pension payments of 3,000

rubles (approximately \$50) to those with disabilities or those over the age of 80, and payments of 5,000 rubles (approximately \$83) to World War II veterans.[5] The decree also orders that social services pay pregnant women 10,000 rubles during pregnancy and an additional 20,000 rubles (approximately \$332) when the child is born.[6] The decree excludes refugees and specifies that Russian Federal Republics must execute the payments to the parties.[7]

**Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to trade claims of shelling at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, including at the Tenth Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.[8]** Russia blocked a proposal aimed at strengthening the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons on August 27 in objection to a clause concerning Ukrainian control of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.[9] The Ukrainian Mission to the United Nations published a statement signed by a large proportion of NPT signatories at the last meeting of the conference that condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine, nuclear rhetoric, and provocative statements as “inconsistent with the recent P5 Leaders Joint Statement on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races.”[10] **Russia has further begun to implement strategies similar to those used by Iran in attempt to manipulate and possibly delay an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) mission to the plant in the near future.** The New York Times reported on August 27 that the IAEA had assembled a mission consisting of IAEA Chief Rafael Mariano Grossi and 13 experts from “mostly neutral countries” to visit Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant for observation next week.[11] The list notably excludes the United States and the United Kingdom, which Russia views as unfairly biased. The IAEA stated that the IAEA remained in active consultations for an upcoming mission.[12] Ukrainian official sources have reported that Russian special forces are torturing Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant employees to prevent them from disclosing safety violations to IAEA inspectors, that Russian authorities are attempting to limit the presence of Ukrainian employees at the plant, and that occupation authorities have begun collecting signatures from Enerhodar residents demanding an end to Ukrainian shelling to present to inspectors.[13] Manipulation of the nationality of inspectors and attacks on the “fairness” of IAEA inspections are tactics that Iran has long used to obfuscate its obstruction of IAEA inspections.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian President Vladimir Putin issued two decrees in a reported effort to assist stateless peoples and residents of Donbas and Ukraine live and work in the Russian Federation.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations northwest of Slovyansk.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southeast of Bakhmut and west and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces did not conduct any reported offensive operations in Kherson or Zaporizhzhia Oblasts.
- The Kremlin likely directed a media outlet closely affiliated with Moscow to criticize the Governor of St. Petersburg Alexander Beglov for failing to incentivize recruitment to volunteer battalions within the city.
- Russian occupation authorities continued efforts to facilitate the integration of the education system in occupied territories in Ukraine according to Russian standards.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 28**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. KaganAugust 27, 7:30ET

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The volunteer battalions constituting Russia's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps will likely deploy to Ukraine in ad hoc combined arms units to renew offensive operations, possibly on the Donetsk City axis and the Southern Axis. The volunteer battalions Russia has been forming have been divided into two general groups, as ISW has previously reported. Some battalions are deploying to the front lines as soon as they have completed their abbreviated initial training. Others have been coalescing into a new 3rd Army Corps.[11] An analysis by Janes Intelligence Group of new images from combat training for elements of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps at the Mulino Training

Ground in Nizhny Novgorod found 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps troops training with more modern Russian equipment such as BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, T-80BVM and T-90M tanks, and the latest AK-12 assault rifle variants.[\[2\]](#) The other Russian volunteer battalions that have fought in Ukraine, such as the North Ossetian “Alania” Battalion, have entered combat with older equipment. The fact that the 3rd Army Corps units are training on better gear and apparently being held back to deploy in more coherent combined arms groups suggests that the Russian military intends to commit them to offensive operations and hopes to regain momentum somewhere along the front line. Elements of the 3rd Army Corps are reportedly already deploying from Nizhny Novgorod closer towards Russia’s border with Ukraine. The Georgia-based Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) observed T-80BV and T-90M tanks that were in Mulino likely of the 3rd Army Corps deploy to Rostov Oblast on August 27.[\[3\]](#) If this report is correct, it could suggest that the Russian military intends to commit the 3rd Army Corps to reinforce offensive operations near Donetsk City, where drives around Mariinka, Pisky, and Avdiivka have been stalling after making some gains. Elements of the 3rd Army Corps may also deploy to the Southern Axis. A Russian Local media outlet reported that the Khabarovsk Krai “Baron Korf” signals battalion will support the deployment of Russian field posts in Kherson Oblast and provide command and control to the new Russian 3rd Army Corps, indicating the Kremlin will likely deploy 3rd Army Corps elements to Kherson and Ukraine’s south.[\[4\]](#)**3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps elements are unlikely to generate effective combat power, however.** Better equipment does not necessarily make more effective forces when the personnel are not well-trained or disciplined, as many members of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps’ volunteer units are not. Previous military experience is not required for many of 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps’ volunteer elements.[\[5\]](#) Images of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corp elements have shown the volunteers to be physically unfit and old.[\[6\]](#) Analysts have also noted that Russia’s lack of experienced non-commissioned officers (NCOs) will hurt the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps effectiveness.[\[7\]](#) ISW has previously commented on reports of indiscipline among the personnel of the 3rd Army Corps as well.[\[8\]](#)**Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command stated that a 10-person Russian sabotage and reconnaissance group attempted assault operations in Kherson Oblast on August 27, suggesting that Russian offensive capabilities in Kherson Oblast have degraded even further.**[\[9\]](#) A 10-person group amounts to a squad, which is too small to act effectively as a maneuver unit. If the Southern Operational Command correctly reported the size and mission of this unit, it would indicate that Russian ground forces in Ukraine have degraded to the point that they are attempting to conduct offensive operations and echelons too low to make meaningful gains. ISW has no independent confirmation of the current size of Russian assault echelons attempting ground attacks in Ukraine, but this report is consistent with the Ukrainian campaign to degrade Russian logistics capabilities in western Kherson Oblast and ISW’s prior assessments of diminished Russian military morale in Ukraine.[\[10\]](#)**Key Takeaways**

- **Volunteer battalions that comprise Russia’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Corps are likely being prepared to attempt offensive combined arms operations but will likely lack sufficient combat power to make a material difference on the battlefield.**
- **Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command stated that a 10-person Russian sabotage and reconnaissance group attempted assault operations in Kherson Oblast, indicating that Russian offensive capabilities in Kherson Oblast have degraded further.**
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest of Izyum, northeast of Siversk, northeast and south of Bakhmut, and west and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces targeted Russian airborne command-and-control elements in western Kherson Oblast.
- Russian and Ukrainian sources traded accusations of shelling the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian military leadership may be shifting to a new phase of mobilization in central Russia and have likely exhausted pools of potential recruits in more peripheral and disenfranchised regions.
- Russian authorities are intensifying law enforcement operations in occupied areas.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 26

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Mason Clark

August 26, 6:45pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian forces did not make any claimed or assessed territorial gains in Ukraine on August 26, 2022, for the first time since August 18, 2022.[1]** However, Russian forces still conducted limited and unsuccessful ground attacks on the Eastern Axis on August 18.

**The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stated that unspecified actors (but almost certainly Russian forces) reconnected part of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) to the Ukrainian power grid on August 26.[2]** Ukrainian nuclear operating enterprise Energoatom stated that unspecified actors reconnected one of the power units to the ZNPP and are working to add capacity to the ZNPP's operations.[3] Russian forces remain in full control of the plant, though it is unclear why they would have reconnected the power unit.

**Russian occupation authorities remain unlikely to successfully conduct sham referenda to annex Ukrainian territory into the Russian Federation by early September, despite reports of advancing preparations for referenda.** Spokesperson for Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Vadym Skibitsky stated on August 26 that Russian authorities have completed administrative preparations for referenda and created election headquarters, drawn up voter lists, and created election commissions, which Skibitsky stated indicates that the preparatory process for referenda is "almost complete."<sup>[4]</sup> Russian-backed occupation authorities in Zaporizhzhia Oblast announced that they have already audited polling stations, analyzed voter lists, and selected candidates for work in voter precincts and territorial election commissions.<sup>[5]</sup>

However, Russian occupation authorities are unlikely to be able to carry out referenda as they intend (with cooperation from local collaborators) by the purported September 11 deadline due to continued frictions within occupation administrations and ongoing partisan attacks. The Ukrainian advisor to the head of Kherson Oblast, Serhiy Khlan, stated on August 26 that the Kherson occupation administration is struggling to find people to head administrative units in charge of referendum preparations, likely due to a lack of willing locals and low levels of trust in Ukrainian collaborators.<sup>[6]</sup> Khlan notably stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin may have ordered occupation administrators to avoid importing Russian administrators to fill these roles in order to make the referendum process appear like a grassroots initiative with local support.<sup>[7]</sup> Ukrainian sources have previously reported that Ukrainian resistance and increasing partisan attacks are inhibiting preparations for the referendum.<sup>[8]</sup> While Russian authorities could hypothetically forcibly annex Ukrainian territories on an arbitrary date, they are unlikely to do so without holding staged referenda. All observed indicators suggest that Russian authorities seek to create a veneer of local support and participation before conducting the referenda to frame them as widely supported initiatives but face ongoing setbacks that will delay any annexation effort.

### **Key Takeaways**

- **The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stated that elements of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) reconnected to the Ukrainian power grid on August 26.**
- **Russian occupation authorities remain unlikely to successfully conduct sham referenda to annex Ukrainian territory into the Russian Federation by early September, despite reports of advancing preparations for referenda.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest of Izyum, northeast and south of Bakhmut, and on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City.**
- **Ukrainian forces continued targeting Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCS) and military infrastructure in Kherson Oblast which support operations on the west bank of the Dnipro River.**
- **Russian federal subjects (regions) continued additional recruitment drives for volunteer battalions, which continue to deploy to Ukraine.**
- **Ukrainian partisans and internal division continue to pose threats to Russian control of occupied territories.**

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 25**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 25, 6:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's August 25 decree to increase the size of the Russian military starting in January 2023 is unlikely to generate significant combat power in the near future and indicates that Putin is unlikely to order a mass mobilization soon. The decree increases the nominal end strength of the Russian Armed Forces by 137,000 military personnel, from 1,013,628 to 1,150,628, starting on January 1, 2023.[1] The Russian military likely seeks to recover losses from its invasion of Ukraine and generate forces to sustain its operation in Ukraine. The announcement of a relatively modest (yet likely still unattainable) increased end strength target strongly suggests that Putin remains determined to avoid full mobilization. The Kremlin is unlikely to generate sufficient forces to reach an end strength of over 1,150,000 soldiers as the decree stipulates. The Russian military has not historically met its end-strength targets. It had only about 850,000 active-duty military personnel in 2022 before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, for example, well shy of its nominal end strength target of over one million.[2]

Russia would likely face serious obstacles to adding large numbers of new soldiers quickly. Apart from the challenges Russian recruiters face, Russia's net training capacity has likely decreased since February 24, since the Kremlin deployed training elements to participate in combat in Ukraine and these training elements reportedly took causalities.[3] Russia may use the fall conscription cycle in October 2022, which should bring in about 130,000 men, to replenish Russian losses, which reportedly number in the tens of thousands killed and seriously wounded. The Kremlin may alternatively use the additional end strength to formally subsume into the Russian military the forces of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and/or the new Russian volunteer units that are not formally part of the Russian military. The net addition to Russia's combat power in any such case would be very small.

#### **The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) disconnected from the power grid for the first time in its operational history on August 25.**

Ukrainian nuclear operating enterprise Energoatom reported that Russian shelling caused the disconnection by starting fires at ash pits near the Zaporizhzhia Thermal Power Plant (ZTPP), approximately 5km from the ZNPP.[4] Energoatom stated that the ZTPP is currently supplying the ZNPP with power and that work is ongoing to reconnect one of the ZNPP power units back to the Ukrainian power grid.[5]

Russian sources accused Ukrainian forces of firing at the ZNPP, but Russia has not provided clear evidence of Ukrainian troops striking the plant.[6] As ISW has previously reported, Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that Russian troops deliberately conducted mortar strikes against the ash pits at the ZTPP.[7] The GUR also has not provided clear evidence to support its claims. The Russians' failure to provide unequivocal evidence of the extensive shelling they accuse Ukraine of conducting is more noteworthy, however, because Russia controls the ground and could provide more conclusive evidence far more easily than Ukraine could. The GUR also reported on August 20 that Russian officials had indefinitely extended the order for Ukrainian employees of the ZNPP to stay home, and there have been no reports of any

rescission of that order, which means that a portion of the ZNPP's workforce is apparently still absent on Russian orders despite the ongoing emergency.<sup>[8]</sup> Russian forces have also heavily militarized the ZNPP since its capture, despite the fact that the facility is far from the front line and at no risk of imminent Ukrainian ground attack. This pattern of activity continues to make it far more likely that Russian forces have been responsible for kinetic attacks on and around the ZNPP than that Ukrainian forces have been.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northwest and northeast of Slovyansk, northeast and south of Bakhmut, and northwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack in northwestern Kharkiv Oblast.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian military assets and ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian federal subjects (regions) are continuing recruitment efforts for volunteer battalions, which are continuing to deploy to training grounds in Russia and to Ukraine.
- Russian occupation administrators are continuing to take measures to mitigate challenges to their authority and facilitate the economic and educational integration of occupied territories into the Russian system.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 24

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 24, 6:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu stated on August 24 that Russian forces are slowing down the overall pace of their offensive operations in Ukraine while reaffirming that Russia's objectives in the war have not changed. At a meeting with defense ministers from member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Shoigu stated that Russian troops will be slowing down the pace of offensive operations in Ukraine in a conscious effort to minimize civilian casualties.<sup>[1]</sup> Shoigu also reiterated that operations in Ukraine are going according to plan and that Russian forces will accomplish all their objectives, supporting ISW's assessment that Russia's maximalist strategic war aims in Ukraine have not changed.<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian MoD has previously issued similar statements to account for the pace of operations in Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> Shoigu's statement may also represent an attempt by the Russian MoD to set information conditions to explain and excuse the negligible gains Russian forces have made in Ukraine in the last six weeks. Since Russian forces resumed offensive operations following a pause on July 16 Russian forces have gained about 450.84 km<sup>2</sup> (roughly 174 square miles) of new territory, an area around the size of Andorra. Russian forces have lost roughly 45,000 km<sup>2</sup> of territory since March 21 (the estimated date of Russian forces' deepest advance into Ukraine), an area

larger than Denmark. As ISW has previously assessed, Russian forces are unable to translate limited tactical gains into wider operational successes, and their offensive operations in eastern Ukraine are culminating. Shoigu's statement is likely an attempt to explain away these failings.[4]

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces have lost an area larger than Denmark since the high-water mark of their invasion of Ukraine in mid-March and gained an area the size of Andorra (one percent of what they have lost) in the last 39 days.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu reaffirmed that Russia has not changed its maximalist strategic war aims.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest and southeast of Izyum, northeast, and south of Bakhmut, and west and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian military assets and ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts.
- Russian occupation authorities continue to face partisan and internal challenges to the administration of occupation agendas.
- Russian proxy leadership is continuing efforts to oversee the legislative and administrative integration of occupied territories into Russian systems.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 23

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan  
August 23, 8:45 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian government sources confirmed that Russia is bringing Ukrainian children to Russia and having Russian families adopt them.** Russian federal subject (region) Krasnodar Krai's Family and Childhood Administration posted about a program under which Russian authorities transferred over 1,000 children from Mariupol to Tyumen, Irkutsk, Kemerov, and Altay Krai where Russian families have adopted them.[1] The Administration stated that over 300 children are still waiting to "meet their new families" and that citizens who decide to adopt these children will be provided with a one-time bonus by the state.[2] Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) additionally reported that Russian officials transferred 30 Ukrainian children from Khartsyzk, Ilovaysk, and Zuhres in occupied Donetsk Oblast to Nizhny Novgorod under the guise of having the children participate in youth educational-training programs.[3] The forcible transfer of children of one group to another "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" is a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[4]

**Russian authorities are deploying security forces to Luhansk Oblast likely in response to waning support for the war and growing unwillingness to fight among Luhansk residents.** The LNR Internal Ministry reported on August 23 that LNR Internal Ministry personnel conducted joint patrols with consolidated police detachments from the Internal Ministries of St. Petersburg and Leningrad Oblast in Starobilsk, Shchastya, and Stanystia, occupied Luhansk Oblast.[5] The LNR Internal Ministry also reported on August 22 that Rosgvardia (Russian national guard) units conducted security for Russian Flag Day celebrations in Starobilsk.[6] Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Rosgvardia elements in Dovzhansk (formerly Sverdlovsk), Luhansk Oblast are not subordinate to the local LNR forces and that Rosgvardia conducted a search of an LNR official in Dovzhansk.[7] The deployment of Russian security forces to police-occupied areas of Luhansk Oblast supports ISW's

previous assessment that LNR residents and possibly militia forces may be unwilling to continue fighting now that they have reached the Luhansk Oblast borders.[8] Recent intensified Russian efforts to forcibly mobilize residents in Luhansk likely exacerbated this disillusionment, and Russian authorities may be increasing Russian security forces' presence in Luhansk to suppress any internal instability and/or because they are losing confidence in indigenous Luhansk forces.[9]

**Russian authorities' deployment of Rosgvardia elements to security duties in occupied Luhansk Oblast diverts these forces from operations elsewhere in Ukraine, likely contributing to the broader Russian failure to translate limited tactical gains into operational successes.** ISW previously assessed that Russian forces had likely exhausted their momentum from territorial gains around Avdiivka and Bakhmut, Donetsk Oblast – a very small section of the whole Ukrainian theater – partially due to their inability to allocate sufficient resources to offensive operations.[10] LNR forces' unwillingness to fight in the war, coupled with Rosgvardia forces' presence in the rear instead of near the front will likely contribute to continued Russian failures to make significant territorial gains.

**Russian officials may have conducted a false flag event in Donetsk City on August 23 to justify attacks against Ukrainian government buildings on August 24, Ukrainian Independence Day.**

Social media networks in Donetsk City reported that a strike caused damage to the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) administrative building, where DNR Head Denis Pushilin works.[11] Pushilin was reportedly absent at the time of the strike. Russian media framed the attack as a direct Ukrainian strike on a DNR government building, potentially to set information conditions for retaliatory strikes against Ukrainian government buildings on Ukrainian Independence Day.[12] Ukrainian government authorities previously warned government workers in Kyiv to work from home the week of August 22 to 26 and cited concerns that Russian forces will target Ukrainian government assets as part of an extended missile and artillery campaign on Independence Day.[13] Russian-backed head of Kherson's occupation administration Kirill Stremousov also claimed on August 22 that his administration was preparing for Ukrainian provocations on Independence Day, which could have been conditions-setting for a false-flag attack.[14]

**Unverifiable sources reported that axis commanders in Ukraine are reporting directly to Russian President Vladimir Putin, bypassing both the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov in the chain of command.** Independent Russian outlet *Vazhnye Istoryi* or *iStories* quoted unnamed sources within the Russian General Staff stating that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu has lost Putin's trust after the initial phase of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine that failed despite Shoigu's assurances of a swift victory.[15] The sources claimed that Putin now bypasses Shoigu and interacts directly with Commander of Central Military District Alexander Lapin who oversees the "central" group of forces in Ukraine, and the Commander of the Russian Aerospace Forces Sergey Surovikin who commands the "southern" group of forces. ISW cannot independently verify the validity of this report, but if the report is true, it indicates that Putin is also bypassing Gerasimov.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian government sources confirmed that Russian authorities are bringing Ukrainian children to Russia and having Russian families adopt them. The forcible transfer of children from one group to another "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" is a violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.**
- **Russian authorities are deploying security forces to Luhansk Oblast likely in response to waning support for the war and growing unwillingness to fight among Luhansk residents. This deployment diverts these forces from operations elsewhere in Ukraine, likely contributing to the broader Russian failure to translate limited tactical gains into operational successes.**
- **Russian officials may have conducted a false flag event in Donetsk City to justify attacks against Ukrainian government buildings on Ukrainian Independence Day.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northeast and south of Bakhmut, on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City, and southwest of Donetsk City.**
- **Russian forces made limited gains east of Mykolaiv City and in northwestern Kherson Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian military assets and ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Kherson Oblast.**

- Russian federal subjects (regions) are continuing to increase one-time enlistment bonuses for recruits, and are likely recruiting personnel with no prior military experience for specialist positions.
- Ukrainian partisan activity continues to disrupt Russian occupation activities.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 22

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 22, 6:15 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian occupation officials in Zaporizhia Oblast have obliquely declared the region's independence from Ukraine by falsely identifying Ukrainian citizens entering the occupied region as temporary asylum seekers.** Head of the Zaporizhia Oblast occupation administration Yevheny Balitsky signed an order that designates Ukrainian citizens arriving in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast as temporary asylum seekers based on Russian law.<sup>[1]</sup> The order requires the registration of Ukrainian and Russian citizens based on their place of residence or place of arrival in the Russian-occupied parts of Zaporizhia Oblast and requires the distribution of temporary identification forms for all "stateless persons." Ukrainians and Russians may register if they present proof of their temporary asylum application. This decree has various implications under both international law and domestic Russian law. International law states that a refugee is an individual from outside the country (or who is stateless) who is seeking "temporary asylum" in another country to escape persecution.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian law defines a refugee as a person "who is outside of his/her country of nationality or habitual residence."<sup>[3]</sup> Neither of these statuses properly apply to the majority of people crossing from unoccupied Ukraine into occupied Zaporizhia.

**Russian occupation authorities are thus falsely classifying all Ukrainians entering occupied territories in Zaporizhia Oblast as refugees escaping persecution in Ukraine.** The order also de facto identifies Ukraine as a separate country from the Zaporizhia Oblast entity, as defined by the occupation authority. By classifying all Ukrainians as refugees, Russian occupation authorities are establishing a new legal category that might have its own restrictions. Russian occupation authorities may use the refugee status to restrict Ukrainians who temporarily return to occupied territories after evacuating from them. The order will likely affect Ukrainian citizens traveling to occupied Kherson Oblast via the checkpoint in Vasylivka, Zaporizhia Oblast, as the order requires the registration of individuals at the point of arrival in the occupied Zaporizhia Oblast, and Vasylivka is the checkpoint serving Kherson as well as Zaporizhia Oblasts.

### Key Takeaways

- Russian-backed occupation authorities in Zaporizhia Oblast have obliquely declared the independence of the occupied areas of the oblast by falsely identifying Ukrainian citizens entering from unoccupied Ukraine as temporary asylum seekers.
- Russian forces conducted localized spoiling attacks southwest and southeast of Izyum.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks southeast of Siversk and northeast and south of Bakhmut.

- Russian forces continued attempts to advance from the northern and western outskirts of Donetsk City and conducted limited ground attacks southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces made marginal gains along the Mykolaiv-Kherson line.
- Ukrainian intelligence stated that the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) will start “general mobilization” processes on September 1.
- Prymorsky Krai announced the formation of a new repair and service volunteer battalion.
- Ukrainian partisans continued to conduct attacks against Russian forces in occupied Melitopol.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 21

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 20, 9:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian forces' momentum from territorial gains around Bakhmut and Avdiivka in late July is likely exhausted, and Russian attacks in eastern Ukraine are likely culminating although very small Russian advances will likely continue. Russian forces seized Novoluhanske and the Vuhlehirskaya Thermal Power Plant (TPP) southeast of Bakhmut on July 25 and 26, respectively, consolidating Russian control around difficult water features after many weeks of fighting. Russian sources celebrated these gains as a significant military victory without noting that Ukrainian military Ukrainian forces successfully broke contact and withdrew from the area.<sup>[1]</sup> Russian forces also celebrated the capture of Ukrainian fortifications around the Butivka Coal Mine ventilation shaft southwest of Avdiivka, after Ukrainian forces withdrew from the area on July 30.<sup>[2]</sup> Russian forces capitalized on these gains to a limited extent and have been attacking toward Bakhmut from the northeast and southeast, and around Avdiivka, but these attacks are now stalling. Russian forces have not made significant territorial gains around Bakhmut or Avdiivka since their advances through Novoluhanske, the power plant, the Butivka Coal Mine, and a few small settlements near those areas.

Russian forces' failure to capitalize on prior gains around Bakhmut and Avdiivka is an example of a more fundamental Russian military problem—the demonstrated inability to translate tactical gains into operational successes. Russian forces have consistently failed to take advantage of tactical breakthroughs to maneuver into Ukrainian rear areas or unhinge significant parts of the Ukrainian defensive lines. They therefore continually give the Ukrainians time to disengage tactically and re-establish defensible positions against which the Russians must then launch new deliberate attacks. This phenomenon helps explain the extremely slow rate of Russian advances in the east and strongly suggests that the Russians will be unable to take much more ground in the coming months unless the situation develops in unforeseen ways. Russian forces will likely remain unable to commit enough resources to any one offensive operation to regain the momentum necessary for significant territorial advances that translate to operational successes. Russian forces will also need to generate and commit additional assault groups, equipment, and morale to resume even these limited territorial advances yielding small tactical gains.

Russian forces likely face issues repairing combat aircraft due to Western sanctions and may be attempting to bypass these sanctions by leveraging Belarusian connections with less severe sanctions. The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) stated that the Russian and Belarusian Defense Ministries signed “urgent” contracts on August 20 to repair and restore Russian military aviation equipment on Belarusian territory reportedly for further use in Ukraine.<sup>[3]</sup> Western sanctions against Russia have largely banned the transfer of equipment to the state of Russia as a whole, while sanctions against Belarus largely target individual Belarusian entities.<sup>[4]</sup> Western countries have previously sanctioned Belarusian industrial-military complex entities producing radar systems, automobiles, and repairing tracked vehicles, but it is unclear to what extent the sanctions impacted Belarusian import of aviation repair parts.<sup>[5]</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces transferred some unspecified air defense equipment to Belarus from Russia on August 21. The Ukrainian General Staff

also reported that Russian forces will close certain sections of Russian airspace in the Lipetsk, Voronezh, and Belgorod Oblasts from August 22-25.[6] The Russian-Belarusian agreement may suggest that Russian officials are attempting to circumvent sanctions on Russia, as it may be easier to import repair parts to Belarus than to Russia.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine have likely exhausted the limited momentum they gained at the end of July and are likely culminating. The Russian military has shown a continual inability to translate small tactical gains into operational successes, a failing that will likely prevent Russia from making significant territorial advances in the coming months barring major changes on the battlefield.
- Ukrainian military intelligence reports that Russia and Belarus have reached an “urgent” agreement for Belarus to repair damaged Russian aviation equipment for re-use in Ukraine. This agreement could be part of a Russian effort to use the looser sanctions regime on Belarus to circumvent sectoral sanctions on Russia.
- Russian forces attempted several unsuccessful ground assaults southwest and southeast of Izyum.
- Russian forces launched a ground attack southeast of Siversk and northeast and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces made limited gains west of Donetsk City but did not conduct any ground assaults on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border.
- Russian forces attempted unsuccessful ground assaults southwest of Donetsk City and continued attacking settlements northwest and southwest of Avdiivka.
- Russian forces conducted several assaults on the Kherson-Mykolaiv frontline and made partial advances east of Mykolaiv City.
- Russian forces are likely not training new recruits in discipline, creating an entitled force engaging in disorderly conduct in Russia and illegal conduct in Ukraine.
- Russian occupation authorities intensified filtration measures and abductions in occupied territories ahead of Ukraine’s Independence Day on August 24.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 20**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 20, 9:30 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian occupation officials in Crimea reported another drone attack on the Russian Black Sea Fleet Headquarters in Sevastopol on August 20. Russian-appointed Governor of Sevastopol Mikhail Razvozhaev claimed that Russian forces were unable to shoot down a drone, resulting in the drone hitting the roof of the Black Sea Fleet headquarters.[1] Razvozhaev then retracted his initial statement and claimed that a fleet air defense post shot down the drone, which landed on the roof and caught fire.[2] Social media footage showed a loud explosion and a cloud of smoke around the headquarters, and the drone likely detonated rather than being shot down. Some OSINT accounts have identified the drone as a commercially-available “Skyeye 5000mm Pro UAV.”[3] Ukrainian officials did not claim responsibility for the attack as of the time of this publication. ISW has previously reported that Crimean occupation officials have obliquely accused Ukraine of orchestrating a drone attack on the headquarters on July 31 during Russia’s Navy Day.[4]

**Russian occupation officials in Crimea are likely considering strengthening security on the peninsula following the attacks on Russian military infrastructure, and such measures may draw Russian security forces away from the front lines.** Razvozhaev stated that all security services in Sevastopol are operating in “high alert” mode and controlling all entrances to the city.[5] Razvozhaev claimed that Sevastopol residents are asking the occupation administration to increase patrols in the city and establish new checkpoints, returning the peninsula to a security posture such as it had after Russia initially seized it in 2014. ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces have been using all types of security forces, including Rosgvardia, as combat forces and will likely need to divert some of these forces

from the front lines and from occupation security duties elsewhere to defend occupied Crimea.[6] Russia's continued failures to stop attacks against occupied Crimea may also spark public discontent within Russian society. One Russian milblogger criticized Russian forces for not using more electronic warfare (EW) equipment following the first drone attack on July 31.[7] Social media footage already shows many Russians waiting in traffic jams to leave Crimea and go to Russia, which may indicate growing public concern for the effectiveness of Russian security measures.[8]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian occupation officials in Crimea reported another drone attack on the Russian Black Sea Fleet Headquarters in Sevastopol and are likely considering strengthening security on the peninsula.**
- **Russian forces conducted unsuccessful assaults across the Eastern Axis.**
- **Russian forces attempted limited, failed assaults north of Kharkiv City.**
- **Russian forces failed to advance after several assaults northwest of Kherson City and east of Mykolaiv City.**
- **Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian ammunition depots and positions in Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts.**
- **Russian and proxy forces are continuing mobilization efforts, including forced mobilization in occupied territories and advertising campaigns.**
- **Russian occupation authorities continued coercive measures to force civilian cooperation with the occupation administrations.**
- **Conditions in occupied territories continued to deteriorate, indicating ineffective governance.**

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 19**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 19, 7:30 pm ET

**[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.**

**Recent Ukrainian strikes on Russian military and transportation infrastructure in Crimea and Kherson Oblast are likely reducing Russian confidence in the security of Russian rear areas.**

Reports from August 18 about Ukrainian strikes are affecting the Russian information space despite the fact that these reports were likely overblown. Available open-source evidence indicates that Ukrainian forces did not conduct a successful kinetic attack against either the Stary Oskol Air Base in Belgorod or Belbek Air Base in Crimea on August 18. Geolocated footage shows that a fire started at a field just south of the Stary Oskol Airfield (rather than at the airfield itself), and satellite imagery shows Russian forces transporting ammunition and military equipment to a forest close to the field.[1] An unspecified Russian Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official reiterated that Russian air defenses near the Kerch Strait Bridge activated against a Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) rather than an incoming strike.[2] There is no visual evidence of damage to either air base of as August 19. Geolocated footage shows no explosions or evidence of kinetic activity near the Belbek Air Base overnight on August 18-19, lending credence to claims that footage reportedly showing the explosion is recycled footage misattributed to the Belbek Air Base.[3] As ISW reported on August 18, Russian sources largely reported on and disseminated these false or exaggerated reports, indicating broader Russian panic.[4]

Russian authorities are visibly increasing security measures in Crimea, indicating growing worry among Russian authorities and civilians about the threat of Ukrainian strikes on rear areas previously believed to be secure. Russian authorities installed checkpoints to search Ukrainian cars and identify saboteurs in Sevastopol.[5] Certain Russian milbloggers made dramatic, pessimistic assessments that Ukrainian forces used strikes on the Kerch Strait Bridge and Belbek Air Base to conduct reconnaissance on Russian air and missile defense readiness and make assessments for new attacks, particularly the feasibility of a large strike.[6] Ukraine's Center for Strategic Communications (UA StratCom) reported on August 19 that Russian forces are not in control of the situation in Crimea as evidenced by the blocking of the Kerch Strait Bridge and activation of air alarms in Sevastopol for the first time since the start of the invasion.[7] UA StratCom warned that Ukrainian forces have not yet struck the Kerch Strait Bridge with

full capabilities and that prior Ukrainian strikes on the bridge demonstrate that the bridge is not as safe as the Russians previously believed.[8]

**The situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) remained largely unchanged on August 19, despite the Russian Ministry of Defense's August 18 claims that Ukrainian forces would stage a provocation at the ZNPP on August 19.** Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces shelled the ZNPP at night on August 18-19 but did not claim that Ukrainian forces launched a large-scale attack on the facility, contrary to Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) statements on August 18.[9] Zaporizhzhia Oblast Head Oleksandr Starukh emphasized on August 19 that the situation at the ZNPP remains tense but under control.[10]

**Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that Russian authorities are likely preparing to hold show trials for Ukrainian soldiers in Mariupol around August 24, notably coinciding with Ukraine's Independence Day.**[11] The GUR warned that Russian authorities intend to hold a show trial of captured fighters from the Azovstal Steel Plant in the Mariupol Philharmonic Theatre and may use the theatre to stage a false-flag attack on August 24.[12] Mariupol Mayor Advisor Petro Andryushchenko confirmed that the Mariupol occupation administration canceled rehearsal schedules at the theatre in order to accommodate the show trials, which ISW previously reported on August 11.[13] As ISW previously reported, these show trials will likely be orchestrated in order to create the impression for Russian domestic audiences that Russian occupation authorities are taking necessary steps to secure occupied areas as well as attempt to demoralize Ukrainian troops.[14] Russian authorities are likely orienting the trials around Ukraine's Independence Day in order to set further information conditions to exert law enforcement control of occupied areas.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Recent Ukrainian strikes on Russian military and transport infrastructure in Crimea and Kherson Oblast are likely reducing Russian confidence in the security of Russian rear areas.
- The situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) remained relatively unchanged on August 19 despite Russian claims that Ukrainian forces would stage a provocation at the plant.
- Russian authorities are likely preparing show trials of Ukrainian defenders of Azovstal on Ukraine's Independence Day in order to further consolidate occupational control of occupied areas of Ukraine and set conditions to demoralize Ukrainian troops.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks north of Kharkiv City, southwest and southeast of Izyum, east of Siversk, and south and east of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted multiple unsuccessful ground assaults on settlements on the Southern Axis.
- Russia continues to generate regional volunteer units and will likely deploy many of them to Kherson and Ukraine's south as part of the 3rd Army Corps.
- Russian occupation authorities are strengthening their control of educational infrastructure in occupied areas in preparation for the approaching school year and may be sending Ukrainian children to Russia as part of a broader repopulation campaign.

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 18**

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 18, 7pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

There were no claimed or assessed Russian territorial gains in Ukraine on August 18, 2022 for the first time since July 6, 2022.[1] Russian and Ukrainian sources did not claim any new

territorial gains on August 18. However, Russian forces still conducted limited and unsuccessful ground assaults across the eastern axis on August 18.

**Russian sources reported explosions across Crimea—possibly caused by Russian air defenses, Ukrainian reconnaissance, or a Ukrainian attack—the night of August 18.** Three local sources told *Reuters* that at least four explosions struck around Belbek Airbase in Russian-occupied Crimea, near Sevastopol.<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian-appointed governor of Sevastopol, Mikhail Razvozhaev, claimed that preliminary information indicated that Russian air defenses shot down a Ukrainian drone and caused no damage.<sup>[3]</sup> Video of a large explosion that circulated on social media in the immediate aftermath of the reported explosions was from a previous engagement on August 8 and is not from the vicinity of the airbase.<sup>[4]</sup>

Russian sources also claimed that Russian air defenses shot down a drone near the Kerch Bridge between Crimea and Russia on the night of August 18 as social media footage showed active air defenses in the area.<sup>[5]</sup> Ukrainian Presidential Advisor Mykhailo Podolyak had tweeted on August 17 that the Kerch bridge was illegally constructed and "must be dismantled."<sup>[6]</sup> The railway side of the Kerch bridge is an important target for Ukraine to disrupt Russian logistics capabilities into occupied Ukraine. Social media videos also claimed to depict active Russian air defenses at a Russian base in Nova Kakhova in southern Kherson oblast the night of August 18, suggesting a possibly coordinated series of Ukrainian attacks, if there were attacks, or drone overflights.<sup>[7]</sup>

ISW cannot independently verify whether Russian air defenses shot down a Ukrainian UAV, or whether any UAV was present in Kerch or Belbek. A Russian social media user posted video claiming to be at Belbek on the evening of August 18, showing no apparent evidence of a strike there.<sup>[8]</sup> Ukrainian forces will likely continue their campaign to strike Russian military targets in Russian-occupied Crimea to degrade Russian logistics capabilities and degrade Russian capabilities to sustain operations on the west bank of the Dnipro River, as ISW previously assessed.<sup>[9]</sup> However, it is unclear at the time of publication whether the reported explosions are due to Ukrainian attacks or reconnaissance, poor Russian handling of military equipment, successful Russian air defenses, or nervous Russian defenders who are likely steeling themselves for additional attacks in areas that the Russian military had believed until now to be out of the range of Ukrainian forces.

**The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) appears to be setting information conditions to blame Ukrainian forces for future false flag operations at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP).** The chief of Russia's Radiation, Chemical, and Biological Defense Forces, Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov, claimed in an August 18 briefing that Ukrainian forces are preparing for a provocation at the Zaporizhzhia NPP and that the provocation is meant to coincide with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres' visit to Ukraine.<sup>[10]</sup> Kirillov accused Ukrainian forces of preparing to stage this provocation in order to blame Russia for causing a nuclear disaster and create a 30km-wide exclusion zone around the NPP.<sup>[11]</sup> Kirillov's briefing, which was amplified by the Russian MoD, coincides with reports that Russian authorities told Russian NPP employees to not come in to work tomorrow, August 19.<sup>[12]</sup> Leaked footage from within the plant shows five Russian trucks very close to one of the reactors at the NPP on an unspecified date, which may indicate the Russian forces are setting conditions to cause a provocation at the plant and

to shift the information narrative to blame Ukraine for any kinetic events that occur on the territory of the plant.[13]

#### Key Takeaways

- There were no claimed or assessed Russian territorial gains in Ukraine on August 18, 2022 for the first time since July 6, 2022.
- Russian sources reported a series of unidentified and unconfirmed explosions across Crimea on the night of August 18.
- The Russian Ministry of Defense may be setting information conditions to blame Ukraine for a false flag attack at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian forces conducted ground assaults south of Siversk and northeast and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued conducting offensive operations north, west, and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful ground assault on the Zaporizhzhia axis.
- Ukrainian officials confirmed additional strikes on a Russian military base and warehouse in Kherson Oblast.
- The Kremlin is likely leveraging established Cossack organizations to support Russian force generation efforts.
- Russian occupation officials continued preparations for the long-term integration of occupied territories of Ukraine into Russia.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 17

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan  
August 17, 8:45 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian military leadership is likely increasingly losing confidence in the security of Crimea following recent Ukrainian strikes on Russian military objects in Crimea. Russian sources reported on August 17 that Vice Admiral Viktor Sokolov had replaced Admiral Igor Osipov as the commander of the Crimean-based Black Sea Fleet (BSF).[1] The Russian information space, however, was evidently eager to maintain a high level of secrecy regarding Sokolov's appointment due to the claimed threat of "terrorist danger" in Sevastopol.[2] Recent Ukrainian strikes (associated with Ukrainian partisans and Ukrainian Armed Forces) on Russian military assets in Crimea, including the headquarters of the BSF in Sevastopol, have likely placed Russian forces on high alert and led to the restructuring of force composition, logistics, and leadership of the Russian grouping in Crimea in order to mitigate the impact of further strikes. Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate, for example, reported that Russian forces are relocating dozens of fixed and rotary wing aircraft stationed in forward airfields in Crimea to areas deeper in the Crimean Peninsula and in mainland Russia.[3]

Russian leadership and the Russian nationalist information space have become increasingly invested in framing recent Ukrainian strikes on Russian military assets in Crimea as acts of terrorism in order to shift the information narrative away from Russian violations of international law and calls on the West to designate Russia a state sponsor of terrorism. Russian sources inaccurately described the strikes on the BSF headquarters, an ammunition depot, and the Saki Airbase as acts of terrorism. The Russian-appointed head of occupied Crimea, Sergey Askenov, claimed on August 17 that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) in Crimea had neutralized cells of the Hizb ut-Tahrir organization (an Islamist fundamentalist political organization that has historically been active in Central Asia and in Crimea amongst the Crimean Tatar community and is banned in Russia) in Dzhankoi

and Yalta.[4] Aksenov accused the Ukrainian government of coordinating Hizb ut-Tahrir's operations in Crimea without providing any evidence. Russian officials will likely increasingly link Ukrainian partisan attacks against occupied territories with operations conducted by organizations affiliated with Islamist extremism in an attempt to alienate the Ukrainian partisan movement from the international community and undermine Ukraine's calls to officially designate Russia as a state-sponsor of terrorism. Attacks against legitimate Russian military targets fall well within the purview of legal use of force and are not acts of terrorism, nor is there any evidence to suggest that Islamist extremists conducted these attacks.[5]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian military leadership is falsely claiming that recent attacks on Russian military objects in Crimea are terrorist attacks to deflect calls to designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism.
- Russian forces attempted several unsuccessful assaults near the Kharkiv-Donetsk Oblast border in tactically challenging forest areas.
- Russian forces continued to unsuccessfully attack settlements southeast of Siversk.
- Russian forces launched several assaults northeast and south of Bakhmut, and are likely attempting to improve tactical positions near Horlivka.
- Russian forces made limited gains northwest of Donetsk City and near the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast administrative border.
- Russian forces are likely preparing to defend their ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in the Melitopol-Tokmak-Berdyansk triangle by mining settlements on the eastern Zaporizhia Oblast frontline.
- Russian federal subjects are continuing to form new volunteer units and advertise contract service while facing recruitment challenges.
- Russian occupation authorities are struggling to increase control measures in occupied territories amidst increased partisan activity.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 16**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan  
August 16, 9 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Russian and Ukrainian sources reported explosions at an airfield and a critical Russian supply nexus in Crimea on August 16.** Local reports and videos show a series of explosions at a Russian ammunition depot and a transformer substation in Dzhankoiskyi District and an airfield near Hvardiske, Crimea.[1] These explosions both caused significant damage to Russian resources and seriously disrupted Russian logistics. Russian forces have used Dzhankoi as a railway hub for transporting troops and equipment to occupied settlements in southern Zaporizhia Oblast, including Melitopol.[2] Russian authorities temporarily suspended passenger rail service from Russia into Crimea following the attack.[3]

**Ukrainian forces have not officially claimed responsibility for these explosions.** The *New York Times* reported that an anonymous senior Ukrainian official attributed the explosions in Dzhankoiskyi District to "an elite Ukrainian military unit operating behind enemy lines," but no Ukrainian official has publicly come forward to claim responsibility.[4] The Russian Ministry of Defense released a statement calling the explosions "a result of sabotage."<sup>[5]</sup>

**A Ukrainian strike on logistical targets in Crimea, which is the sovereign territory of Ukraine, would not violate Ukrainian commitments to Western partners regarding Ukraine's use of Western-supplied weapons within Ukrainian territory or stated US policy regarding Ukraine's right to use force to regain control of all its territory including areas seized by Russia in 2014.**[6] There are no indications that Ukrainian forces used US-supplied weapons in recent strikes on Crimea, and it is unlikely that they did since the targets are well beyond the range of the US-provided systems.

**Attacks on Russian positions in and around Crimea are likely part of a coherent Ukrainian counter-offensive to regain control of the west bank of the Dnipro River.** Russian supply lines from Crimea directly support Russian forces in mainland Ukraine including those in western Kherson Oblast. Ukraine's targeting of Russian ground lines of communication and logistic and support assets in Crimea is

consistent with the Ukrainian counteroffensive effort that has also targeted bridges over the Dnipro River and Russian logistical support elements in occupied Kherson Oblast.<sup>[7]</sup> The net effects of this campaign will likely be to disrupt the ability of Russian forces to sustain mechanized forces on the west bank of the Dnipro River and to defend them with air and artillery assets on the east bank from Ukrainian counterattacks.

**The Kremlin continues efforts to misrepresent its likely maximalist goals in Ukraine.** ISW assesses that Russian strategic objectives remain unchanged: changing the regime change in Kyiv and securing territorial control over most of Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin omitted mention of territory outside of Donbas while describing the goals of Russia's war in Ukraine on August 15. Putin closed his preliminary remarks to the Army-2022 forum on August 15 with the claim that Russian and Donbas forces are "doing their duty" to fight for Russia and "liberate" Donbas.<sup>[8]</sup> Such a limited statement of Russian goals sharply contrasts with previously articulated Russian war goals to "denazify" and "demilitarize" all of Ukraine. Putin's relatively limited statement additionally is incompatible with Russian actions to integrate occupied parts of Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts into the Russian Federation.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces conducted ground attacks across the Eastern Axis but failed to advance northwest of Slovyansk and east of Siversk.**
- **Russian forces are launching offensive operations around Bakhmut, southwest of Avdiivka, and southwest of Donetsk City.**
- **Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations in northern and northwestern Kherson Oblast.**
- **The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that Ukrainian forces in Nikopol are preparing to conduct provocations at the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant, possibly setting information conditions for further shelling of Nikopol or provocations of its own.**
- **Chechen units are reportedly relocating to Kherson Oblast to police Russian military deserters.**
- **Russian forces struggle to recruit soldiers even for safe, prestigious jobs.**

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 15**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 15, 8:00 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Elements of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) militia reportedly refused to continue fighting in Donetsk Oblast and complained about the grueling pace of offensives outside of Luhansk Oblast. The emotional significance of recent Russian targets in Donetsk Oblast resonates with audiences in the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), but not with LNR audiences tired of grueling offensives beyond their claimed borders. Several Ukrainian channels shared a video on August 15 of soldiers from LNR Battalion 2740 refusing to fight for the DNR.<sup>[1]</sup> The soldiers claim that they celebrated victory on July 3, when LNR forces reached the borders of Luhansk Oblast, and that their work is done. At least one Russian milblogger has criticized the LNR servicemembers for desiring Russian support for their own "liberation" and then refusing to fight in Donetsk Oblast.<sup>[2]</sup> ISW cannot independently verify the origin or authenticity of this particular video. Its message reflects a larger trend of diminished LNR investment in and morale to support the Russian war in Ukraine, however. This trend is particularly dangerous to Russian forces seeking to recruit still more new soldiers from Luhansk Oblast to make up for recent losses. Further

division within Russian-led forces also threatens to further impede the efficiency of the Russian war effort.

DNR units have previously recorded similar appeals when operating in Luhansk, Kharkiv, and Kherson Oblasts, which may indicate that proxy troops might not fully support the Kremlin's expansive invasion plans. ISW has previously reported that servicemen of the 3rd Infantry Battalion of the DNR's 105th Infantry Regiment complained when the unit was redeployed from Mariupol to Luhansk Oblast in late May.<sup>[3]</sup> The 113th Regiment of the DNR also published a similar appeal from the Kherson Oblast frontlines in early June.<sup>[4]</sup> Another serviceman of an unspecified DNR battalion complained that Russian border guards held the unit at the Belgorod Oblast border after the unit fought around Kharkiv City in mid-May to allow Russian units to withdraw first.<sup>[5]</sup> DNR-based war correspondents have been boasting about the DNR progress around Avdiivka, but such attitudes may sour again if the DNR units are recommitted to another axis.

Russia's annual Technical Forum and Army Games which began in Moscow on August 13 do not represent any immediate military threat to Ukraine. The forum and army games are not military exercises. The forum is the Kremlin's premier annual military-industrial complex exposition and generates reliable arms sale revenue, which the Kremlin uses to supplement income lost due to sanctions.<sup>[6]</sup> The Army Games are a complementary series of competitive military sporting events that the Kremlin uses to demonstrate Russian weapons systems in the field and develop relationships with foreign militaries. This year's Army Technical Forum will be held from August 15 to August 21 and the Army Games will run from August 13 to August 27.<sup>[7]</sup>

#### Key Takeaways

- A reported video of LNR servicemen refusing to fight in Donetsk Oblast suggests further division among Russian-led forces.
- Russian forces attempted several limited ground assaults northwest of Slovyansk.
- Russian forces conducted multiple offensive operations east and southeast of Siversk and northeast and southeast of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued conducting offensive operations northwest, west, and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground assault north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces continued to trade accusations of shelling the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- St. Petersburg authorities officially denied summoning local men to military recruitment and enlistment centers for discussions of contract service.
- Russian occupation authorities continued preparations for the integration of occupied territories of Ukraine into Russia.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 14

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 14, 9:30 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian and proxy troops in Ukraine are likely operating in roughly six groups of forces oriented on Kharkiv City and northeastern Kharkiv Oblast; along the Izyum-Sloviansk line; the Siversk-Lysychansk area; Bakhmut; the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area; and Southern Ukraine. The Kharkiv City and Siversk-Lysychansk groups are likely built around cores drawn from the Western and Central Military Districts respectively. The Izyum-Sloviansk axis is increasingly manned by recently formed volunteer battalions that likely have very low combat power. Wagner Group private military company (PMC) soldiers are in the lead around Bakhmut, while forces drawn from the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) predominate in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area. Troops from the Southern Military District (SMD) likely formed the original core of forces in Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts but have been reinforced with troops of the Eastern Military District, Airborne Forces, and Rosgvardia. None of these groupings is homogeneous—elements of various military districts, proxy forces, volunteer units, and other formations are scattered throughout the theater.

These dispositions suggest that Moscow is prioritizing the advance around Bakhmut and, possibly, toward Siversk with its Russian forces while seeking to draw on the enthusiasm of DNR forces to seize ground they have failed to take since 2014 on the Avdiivka axis. The high concentration of volunteer battalions around Izyum and Sloviansk suggests that that area is not a focus of Russian attention and may be vulnerable to Ukrainian counterattacks. The congeries of forces in and around Kherson Oblast may pose significant challenges to Russian command and control, especially if Ukrainian forces press a counteroffensive there.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian and proxy troops in Ukraine are operating in roughly six force groupings.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks north of Kharkiv City, northwest of Sloviansk, east of Siversk, and made unspecified gains around Bakhmut.
- Ukrainian forces reportedly struck a Wagner force concentration in Popasna, Luhansk Oblast, inflicting casualties.
- Forty-two states called on Russian forces to withdraw from the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in Enerhodar, just two to four hours before another strike hit Enerhodar.
- Ukrainian forces struck the Antonivsky road bridge, likely keeping all three road bridges to and on the right bank of the Dnipro inoperable to heavy equipment.
- Russian military recruitment and enlistment centers continue to face challenges in incentivizing Russians to sign military service contracts.
- Russian occupation authorities continued rubleization measures and civilian data collection in occupied territories to set conditions for annexation referenda.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 13

Click [here](#) to read the full report.

Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 13, 8pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Ukrainian forces are continuing efforts to disrupt Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) that support Russian forces on the right bank of the Dnipro River. Ukrainian forces struck the bridge on the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) dam again on August 13, reportedly rendering the bridge unusable by heavy vehicles.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukraine's Southern Operational Command had previously reported on August 10 that the Kakhovka HPP dam bridge was unfit for use.<sup>[2]</sup> The Kakhovka bridge was the only road bridge Russian forces could use following

Ukrainian forces' successful efforts to put the Antonivsky road bridge out of commission. The UK Defense Ministry has claimed that Russian forces now have no bridges usable to bring heavy equipment or supplies over the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast and must rely mainly on the pontoon ferry they have established near the Antonivsky road bridge.<sup>[3]</sup> ISW cannot confirm at this time whether Russian forces can use the Antonivsky rail bridge to resupply forces on the right bank of the Dnipro River.

Russian forces cannot support mechanized operations at scale without a reliable GLOC. Bringing ammunition, fuel, and heavy equipment sufficient for offensive or even large-scale defensive operations across pontoon ferries or by air is impractical if not impossible. If Ukrainian forces have disrupted all three bridges and can prevent the Russians from restoring any of them to usability for a protracted period then Russian forces on the west bank of the Dnipro will likely lose the ability to defend themselves against even limited Ukrainian counterattacks.

Indicators of degraded Russian supplies resulting from the disruption of Russian GLOCs over the Dnipro River would include: observed fuel and ammunition shortages among Russian forces in western Kherson Oblast; abandoned Russian vehicles; decreased intensity and, finally, cessation of Russian ground assaults and artillery attacks; possibly increased instances of Russian looting; increased reports from Russian soldiers about supply shortfalls; increased numbers of Russian prisoners of war taken by Ukrainian forces; and an observed absence of new heavy machinery transported to western Kherson. Such indicators could take days or weeks to observe depending on how much Russian forces have been able to stockpile supplies on the west bank of the Dnipro and how successful Ukrainian forces are at finding and destroying those stockpiles while keeping the bridges inoperable.

Ukrainian Mykolaiv Oblast Head Vitaly Kim reported that unspecified Russian military command elements left upper Kherson Oblast and relocated to the left bank of the Dnipro River, suggesting that the Russian military leadership is concerned about being trapped on the wrong side of the river.<sup>[4]</sup> Ukrainian Advisor to the Minister of Internal Affairs Rostislav Smirnov also stated that Russia has deployed 90% of its air assault forces (presumably 90% of those deployed in Ukraine) to unspecified locations in southern Ukraine to augment Russian defenses or possibly prepare for Russian counteroffensives.<sup>[5]</sup> It is unclear whether the Russian airborne units Smirnov mentioned are concentrated exclusively in Kherson Oblast or also deployed near Zaporizhia. Elements of the Russian 7<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division are known to be operating in Kherson Oblast as of at least August 10.<sup>[6]</sup> The concentration of Russian Airborne Forces in western Kherson Oblast could indicate Russian efforts to use forces to defend against a Ukrainian counteroffensive that they are more likely to be able to exfiltrate by air if they are unable to hold the Ukrainians back or reestablish their GLOCs. Airborne forces are easier to move by aircraft than regular mechanized forces, of course, although the Russians could find it challenging and very risky to try to move forces by air given Ukrainian attacks on airfields in Kherson Oblast and Russian failure to secure air superiority.

**Russian forces may be reprioritizing advances in northeastern Donetsk Oblast in order to draw attention from Ukrainian counteroffensive actions in Southern Ukraine.** Russian forces had seemingly scaled back offensive actions east of Siversk and conducted sporadic and limited ground attacks while relying heavily on artillery barrages of surrounding settlements since August 6.<sup>[7]</sup> However, since August 11, Russian forces have increased the number of limited ground attacks in the Siversk area.<sup>[8]</sup> These attacks, along with continued assaults in the direction of Bakhmut, may constitute an effort to draw Ukrainian materiel and personnel to the Bakhmut–Siversk line in northeastern Donetsk Oblast in order to detract Ukraine's attention from critical areas in the South, where Ukrainian troops have been conducting effective counterattacks and may be setting conditions to launch a counteroffensive.<sup>[9]</sup> Russian forces may hope to shift both tactical and rhetorical focus away from the south in order to alleviate pressure on their own operations along the Southern Axis. ISW will continue to monitor the situation around Siversk.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukrainian forces are continuing efforts to disrupt Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) that support Russian forces on the right bank of the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces may be reprioritizing efforts in northeastern Donetsk Oblast in order to draw Ukrainian attention away from the Southern Axis.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northwest of Slovyansk, east of Siversk, and south and east of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted a limited ground assault north of Kharkiv City.
- Russian and Ukrainian authorities accused each other of shelling the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian authorities are failing to pay Russian reservists and members of volunteer units for service in Ukraine.
- Russian-backed occupation authorities are likely dealing with internal challenges that are complicating efforts to administer occupation regimes and institute restoration projects in decimated areas of Donbas.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 12**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, Katherine Lawlor, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 12, 9:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**The Kremlin is reportedly attempting to mobilize industry to support prolonged war efforts in Ukraine.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Kremlin initiated the “industrial mobilization” of the defense enterprises in early August, banning some employees and the entire leadership at the Russian state industrial conglomerate company Rostec from taking vacations.<sup>[1]</sup> The GUR added that the Military-Industrial Commission of the Russian Federation, chaired by Russian President Vladimir Putin, is preparing to change the state defense order program by early September to increase expenditures by 600-700 billion rubles (approximately \$10 billion). Russian outlet *Ura* also reported that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu likely visited the Uralvagonzavod

factory, the largest tank manufacturer in Russia and the producer of Russia's T-72 main battle tanks, on August 12.[2] The GUR previously reported that Uralvagonzavod faced financial issues due to Western-enforced sanctions and failure to meet state contract obligations.[3] If true, Shoigu's visit could suggest that the Kremlin is attempting to restart or expand the operation of the military-industrial complex. ISW has previously reported that the Kremlin has been conducting a crypto-mobilization of the Russian economy by proposing an amendment to the federal laws on Russian Armed Forces supply matters to the Russian State Duma on June 30.[4] The amendment obliges Russian businesses, regardless of ownership, to fulfill Russian military orders and allows the Kremlin to change work conditions for employees. Putin signed the amendment on July 14, which indicates that the Kremlin will continue to introduce more measures to expand the Kremlin's direct control over the operations of Russia's military-industrial complex.[5]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian forces conducted ground attacks east of Siversk and northeast and southeast of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks southwest and northwest of Donetsk City.
- Ukrainian forces destroyed the last functioning bridge Russian forces used to transport military equipment near the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant.
- Ukrainian officials confirmed additional Ukrainian strikes on Russian ammunition depots and a logistics point in Kherson Oblast.
- Russian regional officials may be misrepresenting percentage fill of newly formed volunteer battalions.
- Ukrainian partisans are likely targeting Russian occupation officials and Ukrainian collaborators who are preparing for the sham annexation referenda to disrupt the Russian annexation of occupied Ukraine.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 11**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 11, 9:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The US State Department called on Russian forces to cease all military activity surrounding the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) and support the creation of a demilitarized zone amidst new reports of shelling at the ZNPP on August 11.[1] The US State Department also called on Russia to return control of the plant to Ukraine.

**Ukrainian and Russian occupation authorities accused each other of shelling the ZNPP on August 11.** Ukraine's nuclear operating enterprise Energoatom reported that Russian shelling damaged the area of the commandant's office, storage of radiation sources, and the nearby fire station.[2] The fire station is approximately 5km east of the ZNPP. The Ukrainian Strategic Communications Center stated that Russian forces are deliberately staging provocations at the ZNPP and are carrying out dangerous experiments involving power lines to blame Ukrainian forces at the United Nations (UN) Security Council.[3] Russian-appointed Zaporizhzhia Oblast Occupation Administration Head Yevgeniy Balitsky claimed that Ukrainian shelling damaged the "Kakhovskaya" high-voltage power line, resulting in a fire and a large cloud of smoke seen on social media footage from the city.[4]

**Russian officials have previously accused Ukraine of striking positions of crucial significance to Ukrainians – such as the falsely-claimed HIMARS strike on the Olenivka colony in occupied Donetsk Oblast.** A CNN investigation concluded that "there is almost no chance that a HIMARS rocket caused the damage to the warehouse where the prisoners were being held."<sup>[5]</sup> Russians may be continuing a similar narrative around the ZNPP to discourage further Western support to Ukraine. ISW cannot independently verify the party responsible for the shelling of the ZNPP.

**Russia's 64th Separate Guards Motor Rifle Brigade (64th SGMRB) of the 35th Combined Arms Army (CAA) has likely been destroyed in combat, possibly as part of an intentional Kremlin effort to conceal the war crimes it committed in Kyiv Oblast.** Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty (RFEFL)

investigative journalist Mark Krutov conducted an investigation into the brigade following its participation in atrocities in Bucha and concluded that after heavy fighting on the Izyum and Slovyansk axes, the brigade has largely ceased to exist.[6] Krutov stated that out of 1,500 soldiers who were in the brigade before the war, 200 to 300 were likely killed.[7] Krutov quoted CNA Russia Studies director Michael Kofman's estimates that the typical ratio for those killed to those wounded in action is around 1 to 3.5, which would mean that the 64th SGMRB suffered up to 700 to 1,000 wounded in action.[8] It is typical for Russian units that are so severely degraded during combat to be disbanded and survivors reallocated into other combat elements, but Krutov noted that Russian President Vladimir Putin cannot disband the 64th SGMRB without embarrassment. Putin had awarded the brigade the honorary "guards" designation on April 18, following the emergence of evidence that it had committed war crimes in Bucha.[9] The brigade was rushed back into combat in eastern Ukraine after it had completed its withdrawal from around Kyiv without much time to rest, refit, receive replacements, or recover. Speculation at the time ran that the Kremlin was eager to have the brigade destroyed in combat to avoid revelation of its war crimes.[10]

**Ukrainian intelligence warned that the Kremlin is setting conditions to launch an informational attack on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in an effort to discredit him.** The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Russian Presidential Administration approved the creation of a new informational task force within the Russian special services responsible for establishing the fake "Zelensky Foundation." [11] The foundation will feature an unspecified falsified proposal targeting foreign aid organizations and will operate as a "multi-level marketing" scheme likely focusing on recruitment in European countries. The GUR noted that the main concept behind the foundation is to distribute misinformation in the European media sphere. The GUR noted that as of August 10, Russian special services had created a site for the foundation, prepared social media fake screenshots and comments, and established a network of bloggers to promote the foundation. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar echoed similar concerns that Russia has intensified its information operations by spreading rumors in an effort to create friction between Ukrainian military and political officials.[12]

**A collection of complaints sent to the Russian military prosecutor's office and verified by Bellingcat and the Insider included instances of Russian authorities tricking or coercing conscripts into taking combat positions, limiting the extent of information provided to the families of Russian soldiers, and failing to provide soldiers with basic food or medical care.** The archive includes reports that Russian commanders have ordered soldiers to launch assaults with no equipment, refused to allow soldiers to quit or to dismiss them for clearly fileable offensives, and failed to notify soldiers' relatives of their death.[13] The report also highlighted complaints from residents of occupied Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts that accused Russian forces of looting, trespassing, and firing military equipment from civilian infrastructure.

**Ukrainian General Staff Main Operations Deputy Chief Oleksiy Gromov stated that Ukrainian forces were not responsible for explosions at the Zyabrovka airfield near Gomel, Belarus overnight on August 10-11.** [14] The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MOD) claimed that an inspection run caused an engine fire at the Zyabrovka airfield and that there were no casualties.[15] Senior Advisor to Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovkaya Franak Viacorka amplified local reports of at least eight explosions near the Zyabrovka airfield.[16] Social media video footage showed flashes near the airfield.[17]

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **The US State Department called on Russian forces to cease all military activity surrounding the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) amidst new reports of shelling at the ZNPP.**
- **Russian forces conducted ground attacks east of Siversk and northeast and southeast of Bakhmut.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks on the north and southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City.**
- **Ukrainian officials confirmed additional Ukrainian strikes on Russian command posts and ammunition depots along the Southern Axis.**
- **Russia's Khabarovsk Krai is forming two new volunteer battalions.**

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 10**

**[Click here to read the full report.](#)**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Angela Howard, Layne Philipson, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 10, 8:00 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukrainian officials framed the August 9 attack in Crimea as the start of Ukraine's counteroffensive in the south, suggesting that the Ukrainian military expects intense fighting in August and September that could decide the outcome of the next phase of the war.** A Ukrainian official told *Politico* on August 10 that "you can say this is it" when asked about the start of Ukraine's planned counteroffensive.<sup>[1]</sup> Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky vaguely noted on August 10 that the war "began with Crimea and must end with Crimea - with its liberation."<sup>[2]</sup>

**Russian officials remain confused about the August 9 attack on the Saki Air Base in Russian-occupied Crimea, over 225km behind Russian lines, which destroyed at least eight Russian aircraft and multiple buildings.** Satellite imagery confirmed reports from Ukraine's air force that the attack destroyed at least eight Russian aircraft, contradicting Russian claims that the explosions did not damage any aircraft and were not the result of an attack.<sup>[3]</sup> Russian outlets shared conflicting stories: the Russian Ministry of Defense claimed on August 9 that munitions had been detonated at a storage site at the airfield due to negligence, not an attack, and claimed that no aircraft were damaged.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian milblogger Rybar claimed on August 10 that the explosion was likely not caused by a missile strike and hypothesized that the explosions could be due to negligence and non-compliance with safety regulations or to a small helicopter with a bomb attacking a nearby parking lot.<sup>[5]</sup> Mixed stories in Russian media and among Russian milbloggers indicate that either officials within the Russian Ministry of Defense have competing theories regarding the attack and are sharing them with the media, or that the Kremlin has failed to coordinate its information operation to deny that Ukraine conducted a successful attack so far behind Russian lines. Russian forces at the airbase likely know by now what happened but may not yet understand how or from exactly where Ukrainian forces conducted the attack.

Ukrainian officials are playing up the evident Russian confusion surrounding the attack to obfuscate Ukraine's longer-range capabilities. An anonymous Ukrainian official told the *New York Times* that the attack was carried out with the help of partisans.<sup>[6]</sup> Another anonymous Ukrainian official told the *Washington Post* that Ukrainian special forces caused the explosion, while other Ukrainian officials implicitly referenced the attack but did not overtly take credit for it.<sup>[7]</sup> ISW still cannot independently assess what caused the explosions at the airfield—satellite imagery depicts multiple craters and scorch marks, but such damage could have been caused by many things--special forces, partisans, or missiles, on-site or from a distance.

Nevertheless, Ukrainian military officials took credit for two long-range missile strikes on an ammunition depot in Novooleksiivka in Henichensk district (north of Crimea) and on the battalion tactical group (BTG) command post of the 217th Guards Airborne Regiment in the Maksyma Horkoho on the southwestern Kherson Oblast coast.<sup>[8]</sup> The settlements are situated 100km and 170km south of frontlines along the Kherson Oblast administrative border respectively. Ukraine's claimed attacks demonstrate longer-range missile capabilities but do not demonstrate the range they would have needed to hit the Saki Air Base from along the front lines. Ukrainian forces have various systems that they could have used or modified to hit Russian military infrastructure in Crimea or southern Kherson Oblast.

**The Kremlin's changing plans suggest that occupying forces will likely move up the date of the annexation referenda in occupied Ukraine.** The advisor to Ukraine's Kherson Oblast Civil Military Administration, Serhiy Khlan, claimed on August 10 that occupation forces have stopped discussing September 11 as a date for Russia's sham referenda on the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories.<sup>[9]</sup> ISW previously assessed September 11, the date that polling will be held in local and regional elections across the Russian Federation, to be the most likely date for annexation referenda to be held.<sup>[10]</sup> Khlan noted that Russian occupation forces had referred to September 11 as the date of the sham referenda, "but now the dates are again unclear." Occupation authorities have taken measures to be able to hold sham referendums at any time—ISW reported on August 3 that Russian forces would offer easily manipulated "online voting" in the Donetsk Oblast referendum and reported on August 7 that

occupation forces in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast were planning door-to-door “surveys” of the local population.[11]

The political, military, economic, and other consequences of a prolonged Russian military occupation of southern and eastern Ukraine would be devastating to the long-term viability of the Ukrainian state.[12] The performative drama of annexation will not change the on-the-ground realities created by the brutal Russian occupation. Forced passportization, rubleization, “filtration,” and other “integration” measures already underway in Russian-occupied areas are far more important and damaging to Ukraine than the referenda would be.[13]

**Ukrainian nuclear operating enterprise Energoatom Head Petro Kotin suggested that Ukrainian forces interrupt power lines leading to the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) should Russian forces start disconnecting the ZNPP from the Ukrainian power system.[14]** Kotin told Reuters on August 9 that Russian forces intend to damage all power lines to the ZNPP and connect the plant to the Russian power grid, effectively stealing the ZNPP from the Ukrainians.[15]

**The Embassy of Uzbekistan in Russia cautioned the Uzbek diaspora that any form of participation in the Russian invasion of Ukraine is punishable by up to 10 years in Uzbek prison, effectively denouncing Russian volunteer recruitment efforts among Central Asian immigrants.** The Embassy noted that Uzbek law prohibits all citizens from engaging in mercenary activity and warned Uzbeks to stay clear of any “provocations.”[16] ISW has previously reported that the Chairman of the Society of Central Asian Uzbeks of Perm Krai, Jahongir Jalolov, called on Uzbek nationals living or working in Perm Krai to form a volunteer battalion in Perm Krai to support Russian forces in Ukraine.[17] Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan supported Jalolov’s proposal and celebrated the loyalty of the Uzbek diaspora in Russia.[18] The Embassy statement was likely a response to Jalolov’s announcement.

**Iran reportedly began training Russian forces on Iranian UAV systems in recent weeks, demonstrating the deepening military cooperation between Iran and Russia.** A US official told CNN that “Russian officials conducted training in Iran as part of the agreement for UAV transfers from Iran to Russia,” citing newly declassified US intelligence.[19] Russia launched a satellite on Iran’s behalf on August 9, likely in exchange for the drones and other military equipment and economic collaboration.[20] Iran may leverage new Russo-Iranian aviation deals to transfer UAVs to Russia for use in Ukraine.[21]

**Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.**

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Russian officials remain confused about the August 9 attack on the Saki Air Base in Russian-occupied Crimea, over 225km behind Russian lines, which destroyed at least eight Russian aircraft and multiple buildings.
- The Kremlin’s changing plans suggest that occupying forces are most likely to move up the date of the annexation referenda in occupied Ukraine. Annexation makes it harder to imagine any negotiated settlement to the war on any terms that Ukraine or the West could accept, demonstrating that the Kremlin is fundamentally unserious about ending the war on any terms short of a Ukrainian surrender.
- **Iran reportedly began training Russian forces on Iranian UAV systems in recent weeks, demonstrating the deepening military cooperation between Iran and Russia.**
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks west of Izyum.
- Russian forces continued limited ground assaults northeast and west of Bakhmut and likely made marginal gains in these areas.
- Russian forces made marginal gains northwest of Donetsk City and are continuing attempts to push northwestward from current footholds on the outskirts of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces conducted multiple unsuccessful offensives north and northeast of Kharkiv City.
- Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful reconnaissance-in-force operation in northwestern Kherson Oblast.
- Russia’s Oryol Oblast is reportedly forming a volunteer battalion.

## **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 9**

**Click here to read the full report.**

Kateryna Stepanenko, Angela Howard, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 9, 7:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

The Ukrainian General Staff made no mention of Izyum in its 1800 situational report on August 9, nor did other prominent Ukrainian sources despite Western sources' claims of an ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive in this area. This silence represents a noteworthy departure from previous Ukrainian coverage of the Kharkiv–Donetsk axis.

Russian and Ukrainian sources reported a series of large explosions deep within Russian-occupied Kherson Oblast and Crimea on August 9, but Ukrainian officials have not claimed responsibility for them as of the time of this publication. Social media users reported witnessing 12 loud explosions at the Saky airbase in Novofedorivka on the Crimean western coast.<sup>[1]</sup> Social media footage only showed the large cloud of smoke and the aftermath of the incident.<sup>[2]</sup> Social media footage also showed a large smoke cloud near Novooleksiivka in Henichensk district, in the vicinity of the Kherson Oblast–Crimean border.<sup>[3]</sup> Advisor to the Kherson Oblast Administration Serhiy Khlan reported that explosions occurred on the Russian ammunition base but noted that there is no official confirmation of Ukrainian involvement in the incident.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that several aircraft munitions detonated in the storage areas of the Saky airbase due to poor fire protocol, rejecting reports that Ukrainian strikes or sabotage at the military facility caused the explosions.<sup>[5]</sup> The Russian Defense Ministry added that the incident did not result in any casualties or damage to Russian aviation equipment. The Russian Health Ministry claimed that five civilians were wounded in the incident, however.<sup>[6]</sup> Social media footage also showed firefighters extinguishing a burning plane, which also contradicts the original Russian Defense Ministry claim.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian-appointed Head of Crimea Sergey Aksyenov claimed that Russian officials are only evacuating a few residents in homes near the airbase, but social media footage showed long traffic jams approaching the Crimean bridge and the departure of several minibusses, reportedly with evacuees.<sup>[8]</sup> Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan claimed that the incident was a result of sabotage rather than a missile or rocket strike.<sup>[9]</sup> Russian milbloggers voiced differing opinions regarding the origin of the strike, with some speculating that Ukrainian forces used US-provided long-range army tactical missile systems (ATACMS).<sup>[10]</sup> Ukrainian forces do not have the ATACMS systems, however.

The Kremlin has little incentive to accuse Ukraine of conducting strikes that caused the damage since such strikes would demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Russian air defense systems, which the Ukrainian sinking of the *Moskva* had already revealed. ISW does not yet have any basis independently to assess the precise cause of the explosions. The apparent simultaneity of explosions at two distinct facilities likely rules out the official Russian version of accidental fire, but it does not rule out either sabotage or long-range missile strike. Ukraine could have modified its Neptune missiles for land-attack use (as the Russians have done with both anti-shipping and anti-aircraft missiles), but there is no evidence to support this hypothesis at this time.

Russia launched an Iranian satellite into orbit on August 9 that could be used to provide military intelligence on Ukraine. Iranian Space Agency Head Hassan Salariyeh stated that the remote-sensing satellite, Khayyam, has a one-meter camera resolution.[11] Khayyam has already begun broadcasting telemetry data.[12] Iranian officials have denied that another state will have access to satellite feed at any point, but Western intelligence officials have claimed that Russian authorities will maintain access.[13]

Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

#### Key Takeaways

- Russian forces conducted ground attacks to the southeast of Siversk and around Bakhmut.
- Russian forces ground attacks north of Donetsk City and southwest of Donetsk City near the Zaporizhia–Donetsk Oblast border.
- Several large explosions hit Russian positions near Sevastopol and north of Crimea, but Russia did not blame Ukraine for them and Ukraine has not taken credit for them.
- Russia launched a surveillance satellite for Iran.
- Western media has reported that a Ukrainian counteroffensive is underway near Izyum, but the Ukrainian General Staff was notably completely silent about the area in its evening report.
- Russian sources suggested that recently-formed volunteer battalions are responsible for much of the Izyum sector.
- Ukrainian officials claimed that Russian forces continued to fire artillery systems from the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant.
- Russian officials are continuing to take prominent roles in preparing for the sham referenda in Russian-occupied regions despite Kremlin claims that Russia is not conducting the referenda.

#### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 8

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Layne Philipson, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 8, 7:00 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Western and Ukrainian outlets circulated a report, likely false, of a Russian general allegedly threatening to destroy Europe's largest nuclear facility, the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), if Russia could not hold the plant. Multiple news outlets shared a screenshot from the Russian social networking site Vkontakte that claimed to cite the Russian head of the Zaporizhzhia occupation garrison, Major General Valery Vasilev, stating that Russia had mined the Zaporizhzhia NPP and that the plant would be "either Russian land or a scorched desert."<sup>[1]</sup> The screenshot appeared to be a news report posted in a Vkontakte group run by Russian outlet *Lenta Novosti Zaporizhzhia*. The outlet itself claimed that the screenshot was from a faked group and denied writing the report.<sup>[2]</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense condemned the report and screenshot as a "fake" and claimed that Vasilev was in Uzbekistan at the time he was purported to have made the statement to forces at Zaporizhzhia.<sup>[3]</sup> Regardless of the origin (or existence) of the original post, the reporting is unreliable. It is indirect and does not claim to cite an official statement or a statement made on any official Russian news or government website.

**This likely misreporting distracts from the very real risks of Russia's militarization of the Zaporizhzhia NPP, which may include mining the plant and almost certainly includes the unsafe storage of military armaments near nuclear reactors and nuclear waste storage**

**facilities.**<sup>[4]</sup> Bellingcat geolocated a drone video of the Zaporizhzhia NPP that was shared by Russian opposition outlet *The Insider* on August 5. The video depicts Russian military vehicles moving in and around the plant, including military trucks and armored vehicles moving around and into the building containing the first of the plant's six nuclear reactors.<sup>[5]</sup> Russian forces have also dug trenches in and around the plant and may have established firing positions.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian officials claim that Ukraine has repeatedly attacked the plant, while Ukrainian officials claim that Russian forces are attacking Ukrainian positions from within the plant, preventing Ukrainian return fire and essentially using the plant as a nuclear shield.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian forces have repeatedly shelled the nearby Ukrainian-controlled town of Nikopol, likely from positions in or around the NPP, since July.<sup>[8]</sup>

ISW continues to assess that Russian forces are likely leveraging the threat of nuclear disaster to degrade Western will to provide military support to a Ukrainian counteroffensive.<sup>[9]</sup>

**Note:** ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- Reporting of a likely falsified Russian statement distracts from the real risks of a Russian-caused nuclear disaster at Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. Russian forces continue to conduct attacks from and store military equipment near the plant's nuclear reactors, likely to play upon Western fears of a nuclear disaster and degrade Western will to provide additional military support to Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted ground attacks northwest of Slovyansk and northeast and southeast of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks northwest and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian officials postponed reopening the Antonivskyi Bridge after a Ukrainian strike damaged the bridge and nearby construction equipment.

- Russian forces are deploying less-professional occupation forces and increasing pressure on Ukrainian populations in occupied areas.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 7

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 7, 8 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian occupation officials may be accelerating their preparations for illegitimate pseudo-referenda on the Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory. The Ukrainian Mayor of Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, Ivan Fedorov, reported on August 7 that resistance among Ukrainian residents has forced Russian authorities to “constantly” change their plans for a referendum. Fedorov claimed that occupation authorities had planned a single day of voting but are now considering seven days of “voting from home” in which armed Russian military personnel will go house to house and “interview” Melitopol residents.<sup>[1]</sup> Fedorov claimed that only about 10% of the civilians remaining in Melitopol support Russia’s occupation and warned that Russian soldiers will threaten to shoot residents who do not vote for annexation.<sup>[2]</sup> Ukrainian Kherson Administration Advisor Sergey Khlan noted that occupation authorities have not fully set conditions for a referendum as of August 7 but are accelerating their preparation after a three-week pause in preparations, which Khlan attributed to Ukrainian HIMARS attacks on Russian occupation logistics.<sup>[3]</sup> Occupation authorities could also alter the timeline of their sham referenda in response to changing realities on the ground, including a Ukrainian counteroffensive. Khlan reported that the preliminary referendum date remains September 11.

By removing in-person voting options and transitioning to house-to-house surveys, Russian occupation authorities are increasing their opportunities to directly intimidate Ukrainian civilians. This effort is unnecessary to rig the vote to the outcome the Kremlin desires but does make any independent oversight of the vote nearly impossible. Occupation authorities may also turn these “surveys” into intelligence gathering operations to weed out Ukrainian opposition in occupied areas. Removing in-person polling stations removes many requirements for bureaucrats to staff those locations. Russian forces have struggled to recruit people into these positions from occupied populations. In-home voting also limits opportunities for partisan attacks on those locations.

The Kremlin may order different types of voting in different occupied locations depending on perceived local support, perceived risk of partisan attacks, and bureaucratic capacity. For

example, the Ukrainian head of the Luhansk Oblast Civil–Military Administration, Serhiy Haidai, reported on August 7 that Russian occupation authorities in Luhansk Oblast have identified venues to host their sham annexation referendum in person.<sup>[4]</sup> Haidai reported that Russian occupation authorities are actively campaigning for annexation by distributing propagandist newspapers and tying the provision of humanitarian aid including food, water, and construction materials to participate in the pseudo-referendum. Haidai said that the practice amounts to blackmail: “we [the Russians] will help you [Ukrainian civilians] meet your basic needs, while you go to the ‘referendum.’ Otherwise, die, and we will fabricate the result without you.” Russia has occupied parts of Luhansk Oblast since 2014 and likely has greater capacity to mobilize collaborators to administer polling stations than in newly occupied areas. ISW reported on August 3 that occupation authorities in Donetsk Oblast may allow in-person and online participation, providing multiple levers for Russian officials to alter the results.<sup>[5]</sup>

**The Iranian Space Agency (ISA) denied reports on August 7 that Russia will use an Iranian satellite over Ukraine for several months after Russia launches the satellite on behalf of Iran.** State-run Iranian news outlet IRNA cited an ISA statement on August 7 asserting that the satellite will be controlled by and from Iran “from day one, immediately upon launch.”<sup>[6]</sup> The ISA emphasized that “No other country will have access to such information, and rumors about satellite imagery being deployed in service of another country’s military objectives are untrue.” The *Washington Post* cited two Western intelligence officials’ claims on August 4 that Russia would retain control of the satellite after launch to surveil Ukraine and would cede control of the satellite to Iran at an indefinite future date.<sup>[7]</sup> ISW reported on August 3 that the Kremlin is likely continuing efforts to leverage its relationship with Tehran in order to receive drones for use in Ukraine.<sup>[8]</sup> ISW cannot independently confirm which state will control the satellite, which Russia plans to launch from Kazakhstan on August 9.

**The UK Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) confirmed ISW’s previous assessments that Russian military leadership has experienced major turn-overs due to Russian military failures in Ukraine.**<sup>[9]</sup> UK MoD reported that at least six Russian commanders have likely been dismissed from their posts since the beginning of the war in February, potentially including Eastern Military District (EMD) commander Colonel General Aleksandr Chayko and Western Military District (WMD) commander Colonel General Aleksandr Zhuravlev. UK MoD additionally stated that Army General Aleksandr Dvornikov has been removed from overall theater command of Ukraine and that Army General Sergey Surovikin has taken over the “Southern Grouping” of forces in Ukraine. UK MoD concluded that the lack of consistency in the Russian command structure and continued losses to military leadership on the battlefield are complicating command and control and the overall effectiveness of operations in Ukraine. ISW has previously reported on changes to Russian military command and continues to track the ramifications of these changes on Russian offensive capabilities.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Key Takeaways

- Russian military leadership continues to experience major turnover, which is likely impacting Russian command and control efforts in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks southwest and southeast of Izyum, east of Siversk, and to the east and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces have likely made incremental gains in settlements on the northwestern and southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City and continued efforts to break Ukrainian defensive lines along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City line of contact.
- Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to advance east of Mykolaiv City on August 7.
- Russian forces are forming a new 72nd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade in Orenburg Oblast as part of the 3rd Army Corps.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 6

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan  
August 6, 9 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Russian and Ukrainian forces traded accusations of dangerous shelling at the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) on August 6 continuing the exchange of accusations ISW reported on August 5.[1] ISW cannot independently determine which party is responsible for the incident. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky condemned the alleged Russian shelling as an "open, brazen crime" and "an act of terror."<sup>[2]</sup> He called on the international community to designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism and to sanction Russia's nuclear industry. [3] Both sides claimed that the shelling caused a fire at the hydrogen station at the plant. The Russian-appointed head of the Zaporizhzhia Oblast Occupation Administration, Evgeniy Balitskyi, claimed on August 5 that Ukrainian forces "decided to put the whole of Europe on the brink of a nuclear catastrophe" by shelling the plant.<sup>[4]</sup> The Ukrainian head of the Zaporizhzhia Oblast Military Administration, Oleksandr Starukh, claimed on August 6 that Russian forces are trying to "provoke" Ukrainians into shelling the NPP to make the West hesitant to provide weapons to Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup>

A Russian opposition outlet reported that Russian forces are storing explosives and ammunition around the nuclear power plant. *The Insider* reported on August 5 that a source claimed Russian forces mined the turbine room of energy block 1 of the NPP around August 2.<sup>[6]</sup> A separate source claimed that about 500 Russian soldiers, as well as armored personnel carriers and anti-aircraft guns, were stationed within the plant and that Russian forces mined the area around the plant. The second source said that Russian forces "store mines and ammunition in the immediate vicinity of the energy blocks, under trestles, with some of the ammunition stored inside the energy block." The second source was unsure "whether the energy block has been mined or is simply used for storing explosives." *The Insider* reported that Russian forces established Grad rocket batteries near the village of Vodyane, approximately 4 km from the NPP reactors (and approximately 2 km from the spent fuel containment units at the plant). Ukrainian channels and officials had reported in mid-July that Russian forces were firing on Nikopol—the Ukrainian town just across the river from the NPP—from near the nuclear reactors at Zaporizhzhia NPP.<sup>[7]</sup> Ukraine's Southern Military Command has subsequently reported that Russian forces have regularly shelled Nikopol with Grad rockets, damaging 47 houses on August 5 and 6.<sup>[8]</sup>

ISW previously assessed on August 3 that Russian forces are likely using the NPP to play on Western fears of a nuclear disaster in Ukraine in an effort to degrade Western will to provide military support to a Ukrainian counteroffensive, while also effectively using the plant as a nuclear shield to prevent Ukrainian strikes on Russian forces and equipment.<sup>[9]</sup>

Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

#### Key Takeaways

- A Russian opposition outlet reported that Russian forces are storing explosives and mines in and around Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and may have mined parts of the plant. Russian forces may also be firing rockets at Ukrainian positions from within or near the plant.
- Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northwest of Slovyansk and east and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian forces conducted a series of ground attacks to attempt to break through Ukrainian defensive lines north, west, and south of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations in southern Ukraine and continued to undertake defensive measures.
- Ongoing Ukrainian partisan activity and civilian resistance are frustrating Russian occupation forces as Russian occupation authorities continue to prepare for the integration of occupied territories into the Russian Federation following their upcoming sham annexation referenda.
- Russian state media advocated for labor camps, repressions, and shooting of Ukrainian partisans and civilians that refused to cooperate with Russian-appointed officials in occupied Ukrainian territories.

### Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 5

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

#### **Ukrainian officials confirmed that Russia is using Iranian-provided drones in Ukraine.**

Advisor to the Ukrainian President's Office, Oleksiy Arestovych, stated on August 5 that Iran handed 46 drones over to Russia and that the Ukrainian government has already noted the use of these drones in combat in Ukraine. [1] At least a portion of the provided drones are older-generation "Shahed 129" heavy strike drones, which Russian forces may seek to use to attack US-provided HIMARS in Ukraine. [2] It is unclear whether the 46 drones represent all the drones that Tehran has agreed to send, or the number of Iranian drones that are currently operating in Ukraine.

#### Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian officials confirmed that Russian forces are using Iranian-provided drones in Ukraine.
- Russian forces conducted unsuccessful ground assaults on settlements south of Bakhmut.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces exchanged heavy artillery fire in Pisky, suggesting that Russian forces are unlikely to have full control of Pisky despite Russian claims.
- Russian forces conducted several limited ground assaults to the north, northwest, and southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian and Ukrainian forces accused each other of firing rounds near the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Enerhodar, but ISW cannot independently determine which party is responsible for the incident.
- Russian forces have repeatedly used artillery systems deliberately positioned within the complex to fire on targets across the Dnipro River.
- Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to advance on Lozove, Kherson Oblast, likely targeting the Ukrainian bridgehead over the Inhulets River.
- Russian federal subjects are forming new volunteer battalions in Omsk and Samara Oblasts.
- Russian occupation authorities are likely accelerating passportization and rubleization efforts and civilian data collection in occupied territories in preparation for the

- upcoming pseudo-referenda on the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory into Russia.
- The Kremlin is continuing to replace Ukrainian collaborators in Russian occupation administrations with Russian officials, likely to prepare for formal Russian governance of annexed areas.

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 4

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Phillipson, Karolina Hird, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

August 4, 9 pm ET

[Click here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

**Ukraine is likely seizing the strategic initiative and forcing Russia to reallocate forces and reprioritize efforts in response to Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.** Russian forces are increasingly transferring personnel and equipment to Kherson and western Zaporizhia Oblasts at the expense of their efforts to seize Slovyansk and Siversk, which they appear to have abandoned. Russian forces are also redeploying military equipment – artillery and aviation in particular – to Crimea from elsewhere in Ukraine. Russian forces have previously withdrawn from or suspended offensive operations on Kharkiv City and the southern axis to prioritize capturing Luhansk Oblast, but they did so on their own initiative based on the changing priorities of their commanders. Russian forces in this case appear to be responding to the Ukrainian counteroffensive threat in Kherson Oblast rather than deliberately choosing objectives on which to concentrate their efforts. Even after Ukrainian forces defeated the Russian attempt to seize Kyiv early in the war, the Russians were able to choose freely to concentrate their operations in the east. Ukraine's preparations for the counteroffensive in Kherson and the initial operations in that counteroffensive combined with the dramatic weakening of Russian forces generally appear to be allowing Ukraine to begin actively shaping the course of the war for the first time.

**The seriousness of the dilemma facing the Russian high command likely depends on Ukraine's ability to sustain significant counteroffensive operations on multiple axes simultaneously.** If Ukraine is able to press hard around Izyum as it continues rolling into the counteroffensive in Kherson, then Russian forces will begin confronting very difficult choices. They will likely need to decide either to abandon their westward positions around Izyum in favor of defending their ground lines of communications (GLOCs) further north and east or to commit more personnel and equipment to try to hold the current front line. Such forces would have to come from another axis, however, putting other Russian gains at risk.

**Russian forces are likely operating in five to seven strike groups of unclear size around Bakhmut, based on the Ukrainian General Staff descriptions of Russian assaults in the area.** Recent Ukrainian General Staff reports have most frequently identified Vershyna, Soledar, Kodema, Bakhmut, and Yakovlivka as the repeated targets of localized concentrated Russian efforts around Bakhmut.<sup>[1]</sup> The Russian groups attacking these targets are reportedly operating out of the nearby settlements of Pokrovske, Streapivka, Roty, Semihirya, and Vidrozhannya for now.

**Explosions occurred near the Donetsk Drama Theater and Penal Colony #124 in occupied Donetsk City on August 4.**<sup>[2]</sup> Russian media widely publicized the explosions and blamed Ukrainian artillery, but the Ukrainian Office of the President denied any shelling of Donetsk City on August 4.<sup>[3]</sup> The limited damage visible in the videos Russia has produced as evidence of the Ukrainian attack near the Donetsk Drama Theater appears to be inconsistent with artillery shelling.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian officials have not provided footage of the reported attack on Penal Colony #124. Russian milbloggers widely published the Russian-provided footage of the aftermath of the explosion near the Donetsk Drama Theater and used the opportunity to harshly criticize Ukrainian forces for alleged strikes on civilian targets.<sup>[5]</sup> Were the explosions Ukrainian shelling, they would carry further emotional weight with DNR supporters because they occurred during a farewell ceremony for an occupation forces officer KIA on August 3.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian forces likely hope to use the emotional response of DNR audiences to such claimed Ukrainian attacks to garner support for new offenses in the Avdiivka area and further recruitment campaigns.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Ukraine is likely seizing the strategic initiative and forcing Russia to reallocate forces and reprioritize efforts in response to Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.
- Russian forces attempted to advance northwest of Izyum.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a series of localized counterattacks between Izyum and Slovyansk and regained positions in a number of settlements.
- Russian forces continued ground attacks northeast and south of Bakhmut.
- Russian troops continued attempts to advance on Pisky and conducted a limited ground attack southwest of Donetsk City.
- Russian forces continued to transfer equipment and personnel to northeastern Kherson and western Zaporizhia Oblasts.

### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 3**

[\*\*Click here to read the full report.\*\*](#)

**Kateryna Stepanenko, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan**

**Russian forces are likely using Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Enerhodar to play on Western fears of a nuclear disaster in Ukraine, likely in an effort to degrade Western will to provide military support to a Ukrainian**

**counteroffensive.** International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi said on August 3 that Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), which is currently occupied by Russian forces, is “completely out of control” and that “every principle of nuclear safety has been violated” at the plant.<sup>[1]</sup> He warned that Russian forces are not respecting the physical integrity of the plant and pleaded with Russia and Ukraine to quickly facilitate a visit of IAEA monitors to the complex. Russian Zaporizhia Occupation Administration Head Evgeniy Balitskyi responded that the IAEA was welcome at the plant: “We are ready to show how the Russian military guards it today, and how Ukraine, which receives weapons from the West, uses these weapons, including drones, to attack the nuclear plant, acting like a monkey with a grenade.”<sup>[2]</sup> Russian officials are framing Ukraine as irresponsibly using Western-provided weapons and risking nuclear disaster to dissuade Western and other allied states from providing additional military support to Ukraine’s looming southern counteroffensive.

Russian forces based around the NPP have attacked Ukrainian positions in Nikopol and elsewhere in recent weeks, intentionally putting Ukraine in a difficult position—either Ukraine returns fire, risking international condemnation and a nuclear incident (which Ukrainian forces are unlikely to do), or Ukrainian forces allow Russian forces to continue firing on Ukrainian positions from an effective “safe zone.” Ukrainian Mayor of Enerhodar Dmytro Orlov reported on August 3 that Russian forces launched rockets on Enerhodar from neighboring villages to falsely accuse Ukrainian forces of shelling Enerhodar and endangering the NPP.<sup>[3]</sup> ISW assessed on July 21 that Russian forces may be storing heavy military equipment in the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Enerhodar to protect it from Ukrainian strikes.<sup>[4]</sup> Russian forces have also likely staged false flag attacks around Enerhodar since early July, as ISW previously reported.<sup>[5]</sup>

**Russian forces likely set fire to the prison complex holding Ukrainian POWs in occupied Donetsk Oblast but blamed Ukraine for an alleged precision strike using Western-supplied military equipment, likely to deter additional Western military support to Ukraine. The**

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that it has determined that the Wagner Group deliberately set fire to the prison complex on July 28. This report is consistent with the damage observable in Russian-provided video of the site. The GUR reported that Wagner forces "mined" the building with unspecified flammable substances, which led to a rapid spread of fire throughout the building.<sup>[6]</sup> Russian-provided footage and commercial satellite imagery from the colony showed that the walls of the building were burned but still standing and did not reveal shell craters or other indicators consistent with an artillery strike. ISW previously reported that imagery from the site shows that the attack only damaged one building, did not collapse the walls of that building, and did not leave any shell craters in the vicinity, very strongly suggesting that the destruction of the prison was the result of either a precision strike or an internally planted incendiary or explosive.<sup>[7]</sup> Russian officials previously claimed that the deaths of the POWs were the result of a Ukrainian HIMARS strike, likely as a component of the ongoing Russian information operation attempting to dissuade the US from continuing to provide Ukraine with HIMARS.

**The Kremlin is likely continuing efforts to leverage its relationship with Tehran in order to receive drones for use in Ukraine.** Russian state-owned space agency Roscosmos announced on August 3 that Russia will launch a remote-sensing satellite (named "Khayyam") into orbit on behalf of Iran on August 9.<sup>[8]</sup> The Kremlin may intend this launch to encourage or repay Tehran for the provision of Iranian drones that would be employed in operations in Ukraine, and possibly other military equipment or support. Iran has a huge ballistic missile arsenal and domestic missile manufacturing capabilities that it could provide to Russia in exchange for economic and military cooperation.<sup>[9]</sup> Iran has prioritized the development of its military space program in recent years and launched one satellite in April 2020 and one in April 2022. US and Middle Eastern officials stated as early as June 2021 that Russian officials were preparing to send a Russian-made Kanopus-V satellites to Iran, which would expand Tehran's overall surveillance capabilities in the Middle East and beyond.<sup>[10]</sup> As ISW reported on August 2, Russian and Iran are likely continuing to facilitate cooperation through recently signed bilateral aviation agreements in order to bolster Russian military capabilities in Ukraine and assist Tehran with sanctions mitigation.<sup>[11]</sup>

**The Russian Defense Ministry has altered the focus of its reporting after the fall of Lysychansk, likely to orient on narratives that resonate positively with milbloggers and war correspondents rather than those that draw criticism from that community.** The Russian Defense Ministry has shifted its reporting style to focus on claims of declining Ukrainian morale and successful Russian strikes on Western-provided military equipment, rather than reporting on day-to-day Russian advances on the frontline.<sup>[12]</sup> Russian forces have made limited gains around Bakhmut and Avdiivka in recent days, but the Russian Defense Ministry has not claimed territorial gains around the theater since at least the fall of Lysychansk.

Milbloggers, war correspondents, and other groups have criticized the Defense Ministry and the Kremlin for exaggerated and inaccurate claims of territorial gains, undermining Moscow's narratives and credibility.<sup>[13]</sup> The Defense Ministry apparently flirted with the idea of suppressing or attempting to control the milblogger community, but it seems instead to have opted to adjust its own narratives.<sup>[14]</sup> The Defense Ministry is now letting milbloggers, war correspondents, and DNR officials cover the situation unfolding in Avdiivka, Pisky, and south of Bakhmut positively without making claims of its own that might draw criticism. Milbloggers released footage from the reported capture of the Butivka Coal Mine ventilation shaft and on the southern outskirts of Pisky, where they celebrated recapturing small segments of years-long

contested territory--but the Defense Ministry has made no statement on the subject.[\[15\]](#) Some of the milbloggers such as Maksim Fomin (known under alias Vladelen Tatarzkiy) have previously served within DNR units and include anecdotes about their service in the Donetsk City area prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Such coverage of the war likely aims to boost morale among DNR and Russian fighters. The Kremlin or the Defense Ministry may have decided that the milbloggers and war correspondents are more credible sources for the constituencies it cares most about and realized that its own claims were losing credibility. They may alternatively be focusing on narratives that generate positive resonance within that community.

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Russian forces are likely using Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Enerhodar to play on Western fears of a nuclear disaster in Ukraine, attempting to thereby degrade the will of Western powers to provide military support to a Ukrainian counteroffensive.**
- **Russian forces likely set fire to the prison complex holding Ukrainian POWs in occupied Donetsk Oblast but blamed Ukraine for an alleged precision strike using Western-supplied military equipment, likely to increase US hesitancy to continue providing HIMARS to Ukraine.**
- **Moscow is likely to continue efforts to leverage its relationship with Tehran in order to secure drones for use in Ukraine.**
- **Russian forces conducted a limited ground attack northwest of Slovyansk and continued efforts to advance on Bakhmut from the northeast, east, and southeast.**
- **Russian forces are prioritizing frontal assaults on Avdiivka and failed to gain ground in Pisky.**
- **Russian forces are reportedly forming a strike group to prevent Ukrainian counteroffensives in northern Kherson Oblast or counterattack against them.**
- **Russian occupation authorities may allow both in-person and online voting in upcoming pseudo-referenda on the annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory into Russia, enabling more straightforward Russian vote rigging.**

#### **Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 2**

[Click here to read the full report.](#)

Kateryna Stepanenko, Layne Philipson, Katherine Lawlor, Karolina Hird, and Frederick W. Kagan  
August 2, 9 pm ET

**Russian forces have likely decided to attack Avdiivka frontally from occupied Donetsk Oblast territory rather than waiting for Ukrainian forces to withdraw from their prepared defensive positions as a result of Russian envelopment operations northeast of the settlement.** The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Kremlin-sponsored sources have published videos suggesting that Russian forces pushed Ukrainian forces out of their positions around the Butivka Coal Mine ventilation shaft southwest of Avdiivka.[\[1\]](#) Ukrainian forces have held positions around the Butivka Coal Mine ventilation shaft since 2015 and have described the location as the closest Ukrainian position to Donetsk City and a key defensive outpost for Avdiivka.[\[2\]](#) Russian forces have likely captured the Ukrainian position, given the Ukrainian General Staff's vague reports of "partially" successful Russian advances in the area.[\[3\]](#) Russian forces are also continuing assaults on Pisky, west of Avdiivka, and will likely attempt to seize the E50 highway connecting the two settlements. Russian forces had previously attempted to break through Avdiivka's northeastern outskirts but have not made significant progress in months.

**The Russian Defense Ministry is likely trying to assuage distress that Ukraine's effective use of the US HIMARS is causing Russian military personnel and milbloggers with inaccurate claims of destroying HIMARS launchers.** Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu claimed that Russian forces

have destroyed six US-provided HIMARS and other Western-supplied military equipment in Ukraine in a conference call with the Russian Armed Forces leadership on August 2.<sup>[4]</sup> The Russian Defense Ministry also released a video claiming to have destroyed a building that housed two HIMARS launchers in Kharkiv Oblast on August 1.<sup>[5]</sup> Ukrainian Southern Command Chief Andriy Kovalchuk said that Russian forces did not destroy any HIMARS, and an unnamed Finnish official called Russian claims "wishful thinking."<sup>[6]</sup> The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) also reported that Russian defense authorities are covering up Russian servicemember casualties by transporting wounded Russians in civilian cars and misreporting the number of casualties caused by Ukrainian HIMARS strikes in the media.<sup>[7]</sup> Ukrainian HIMARS strikes have prompted many milbloggers and military correspondents to express concern over the effectiveness of air defense systems and the threats to Russian logistics, and these strikes are likely demoralizing Russian servicemen on the ground.<sup>[8]</sup>

**A representative of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on August 2 that Russia has refused to provide detailed information on which Ukrainian POWs were killed or injured in the July 28 Olenivka prison attack.** GUR Representative Andriy Yusov said that Russia has not responded to requests by Ukraine's Coordinating Headquarters for the Treatment of POWs for information about casualties from the likely Russian-perpetrated attack on the Russian-controlled prison that killed at least 53 Ukrainian POWs.<sup>[9]</sup> Yusov said that of casualties that Russia has posted online some were supposed to be in hospitals or being readied for prisoner exchanges and were not supposed to be at the Olenivka prison. Yusov noted that Ukraine cannot confirm the veracity of online casualty lists at this time, however. Ukraine's Coordinating Headquarters for the Treatment of POWs urged families of POWs to avoid sharing personal details about themselves or their captured loved ones with individuals or unofficial organizations soliciting those details, warning that sharing information could pose a risk to surviving POWs.<sup>[10]</sup> Deputy Ukrainian Prime Minister Irina Vereshchuk said that Russia has not responded to requests to return the bodies of killed POWs to Ukraine as of August 2.<sup>[11]</sup>

**Initial and unconfirmed reports from August 2 suggest that Iran may have sent the first batch of UAVs to Russia for field testing.** A US-based open-source intelligence (OSINT) Twitter account citing unofficial Iranian sources claimed that Iran sent a batch of UAVs to Russia, along with Iranian pilots and technicians who will train for the use and repair of Russian Su-35 aircraft.<sup>[12]</sup> While ISW cannot independently confirm this claim, it is consistent with recent reports that Tehran and Moscow are pursuing greater aviation cooperation in order to circumvent international sanctions on Russia and Iran and support Russian operations in Ukraine.<sup>[13]</sup> If true, this claim suggests that Iran may be receiving Russian Su-35 aircraft in return for the drones, which could have been part of an agreement signed by Moscow and Tehran on July 26.<sup>[14]</sup> The agreement stipulated that Iran would increase the volume of passenger flights to Russia and additionally repair Russian aircraft.<sup>[15]</sup> Tehran may seek to use this agreement to facilitate the acquisition of Russian combat aircraft.

**A Russian missile strike reportedly damaged a Ukrainian air defense system in Lviv Oblast on August 2.<sup>[16]</sup>** The Ukrainian Air Force Command reported that Russian forces launched eight Kh-101 (Kh-555) missiles in the direction of central, southern, and western Ukrainian Oblasts from their positions in the Caspian Sea.<sup>[17]</sup> The Ukrainian Air Force Command reported that Ukrainian air defense forces intercepted seven of the eight missiles.<sup>[18]</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways**

- **Unconfirmed social media reports suggest that Iran may have sent the first batch of drones to Russia and sent pilots and maintenance personnel to train on the Russian Su-35, potentially suggesting that Iran may seek to use recent aviation agreements to facilitate the acquisition of Russian combat aircraft.**
- **Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations northeast and northwest of Kharkiv City.**
- **Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks northwest of Slovyansk and east of Siversk.**
- **Russian forces made marginal gains southeast of Bakhmut and continued offensive operations to the northeast and southeast of Bakhmut.**
- **Russian forces made incremental advances around Avdiivka and are continuing attempts to push southwest of Avdiivka.**
- **Russian forces launched two assaults in northern Kherson Oblast and are continuing to redeploy troops to the Southern Axis.**

- Russian federal subjects are forming new volunteer battalions in Novosibirsk, Saratov, Ulyanovsk, and Kurgan Oblasts, and are changing time periods for enlistment compensations.
- Ukrainian civilians are continuing to resist the Russian occupation with acts of civil disobedience and partisan sabotage as the Kremlin considers longer-term methods of population control in occupied Ukraine.